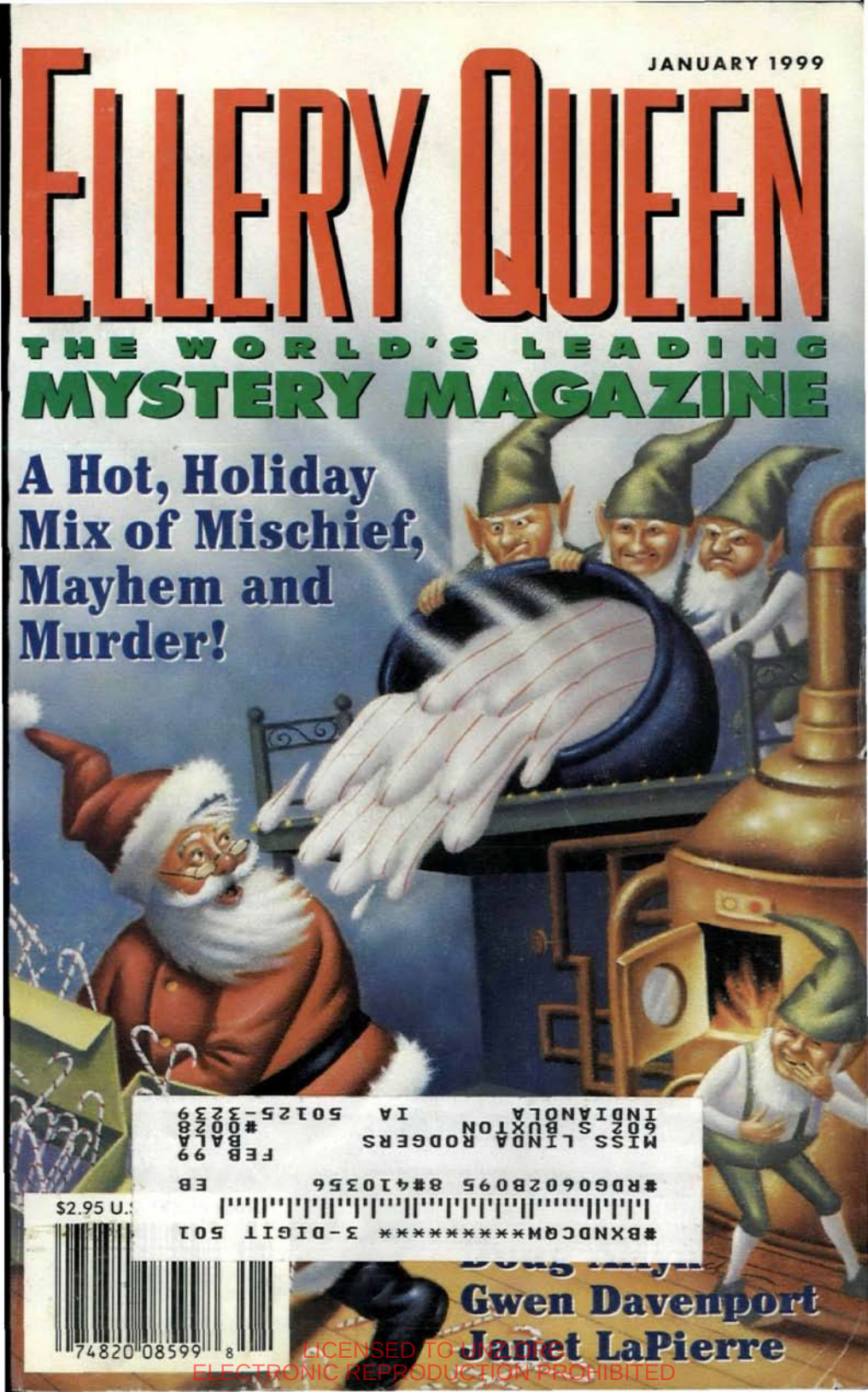
JANUARY 1999

ELLERY QUEEN

THE WORLD'S LEADING
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

A Hot, Holiday Mix of Mischief, Mayhem and Murder!

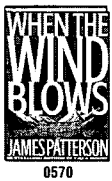


#BXNDCQW********** 3-DIGIT 501
#RD606028095 8#410356 EB
FEB 99
MISS LINDA RODGERS
602 S BUXTON #0028
INDIANOLA IA 50125-3239

$2.95 U.S.
74820 08599 8

Gwen Davenport
Janet LaPierre

LICENSED TO UNZIP.COM
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



0570
~~$25.00~~/$13.48

6197
~~$23.95~~/$12.98

6205
~~$24.95~~/$12.48

5983*
~~$26.00~~/$13.98

1610
~~$21.95~~/$10.98

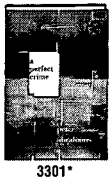
6098*
~~$25.00~~/$12.48

2451*
~~$25.95~~/$14.98

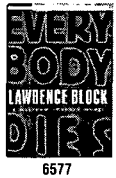
Steal a look at the best

And join *Mystery Guild*® for the hottest titles at criminally low prices!

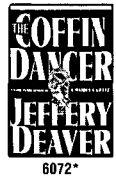
6171*
~~$24.00~~/$12.48



3301*
~~$24.95~~/$12.48

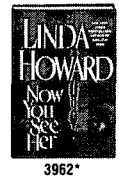


6577
~~$25.00~~/$12.48



6072*
~~$25.00~~/$12.48

3012*
~~$22.95~~/$11.48

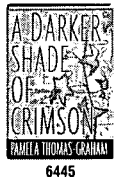


3962*
~~$23.00~~/$11.48

6239*
~~$24.00~~/$11.98

6353*
~~$23.95~~/$11.98

6593
~~$22.00~~/$10.98



6445
~~$23.00~~/$11.48

6601
~~$21.95~~/$10.98

6619
~~$23.00~~/$11.48

SEVEN REASONS TO JOIN NOW...

1. Joining is easy. Start with **6 books for 99¢**. Your bill (including shipping and handling) will come when membership is confirmed. We'll also send your FREE Shoulder Tote.

2. Your satisfaction is guaranteed. If you're not happy with your books, return them within 10 days *at our expense*. Your membership will be canceled; you'll owe nothing. The FREE Tote is yours to keep as our "thank you" for trying us.

3. Save up to 60% off publishers' hardcover edition prices. Just pick at least 4 more books at our regular low prices during your membership. Take up to 2 years! Then you may resign any time.

4. Extra bonus! Take a 7th book now for $3.99, plus shipping and handling, and reduce your membership agreement to only 3 books.

5. A FREE Club Magazine comes to you up to 17 times a year—plus up to 2 special issues. Each reviews the Featured Book Selections and dozens of alternate books. Some are exclusive Club editions you won't find anywhere else.

6. Ordering is risk free. Featured Book Selections are sent to you automatically. To cancel—or order other books—simply send in your Member Reply Form by mail or contact our Web site by the marked date. Shipping and handling (plus sales tax, where applicable) is added to each order. You'll always have 10 days to decide. If your Member Reply Form is late and unwanted books arrive, please return them *at our expense*.

7. Easy ordering through the mail or via our Web site: **www.MysteryGuild.com**.

FREE Shoulder Tote with membership

* Explicit scenes and/or language

Prices in fine print are for publishers' editions.
Prices in bold print are for Club hardcover editions.
All prices are current as we go to press.

E006

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

6478
~~$20.00~~/$9.98

6437
~~$22.00~~/$10.98

6536
~~$22.00~~/$10.98

6213
~~$25.00~~/$12.48

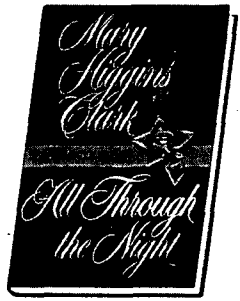
6635
~~$22.95~~/$11.48

6643
~~$23.95~~/$11.98

in suspense...

Take 6 mysteries for 99¢

with membership



6494 ~~$17.00~~/$9.98

6650
~~$24.95~~/$12.48

6254*
~~$22.00~~/$10.98

6361
~~$22.00~~/$10.98

6429
Spec. Ed. $9.98

1685
~~$25.00~~/$12.48

6734
~~$25.00~~/$12.48

6676
~~$23.00~~/$11.48

6775
~~$22.00~~/$10.98

MYSTERY GUILD
www.MysteryGuild.com

MAIL TO: *Mystery Guild*®
6550 East 30th Street
P.O. Box 6362
Indianapolis, IN 46206-6362

Please write book numbers here:

YES! Please enroll me in *Mystery Guild*® according to the risk-free membership plan described in this ad. Send me the 6 BOOKS I've indicated—and bill me just 99¢, plus shipping and handling. Also, send my FREE Shoulder Tote.

SAVE EVEN MORE! Send me this book now and reduce my commitment to 3 books. Bill me an added $3.99, plus shipping and handling.

(write book number)

PT114 34

35

Mr./Mrs. _____

Miss/Ms. _____
(please print)

Address _____ Apt. _____

City _____ State _____ ZIP _____

Telephone, please (_____) _____

Sales tax added where applicable. We reserve the right to reject any application.

EQM 1/99

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

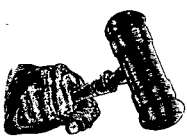
JANUARY 1999

CONTENTS

Deadly display
Page 60

Foul play
Page 98

Cover Illustration by
Fred Lynch



Dell Magazines
1270 Avenue of
the Americas
New York, NY 10020

Note: indicia on
page 143

FICTION

Unchained Melody BY DOUG ALLYN 4
Pool of Tears BY DONALD OLSON 16
Body of Work BY JEREMIAH HEALY 28
The Christmas Tree Killer
BY EDWARD D. HOCH 48
The Corpse on the Roof
BY GWEN DAVENPORT 60
Family Gathering BY JANET LAPIERRE 67
Under the Knife BY PHIL LOVESEY 79
White Like the Snow
BY DAN STUMPF 89
The Triple Score BY TERENCE FAHERTY 98
Noir Lite BY MARGARET CHITTENDEN 119
Python BY JOSEPH MONNINGER 123
A Gallows Song
BY JAMES POWELL 134

REVIEWS

The Jury Box BY JON L. BREEN 25

POETRY

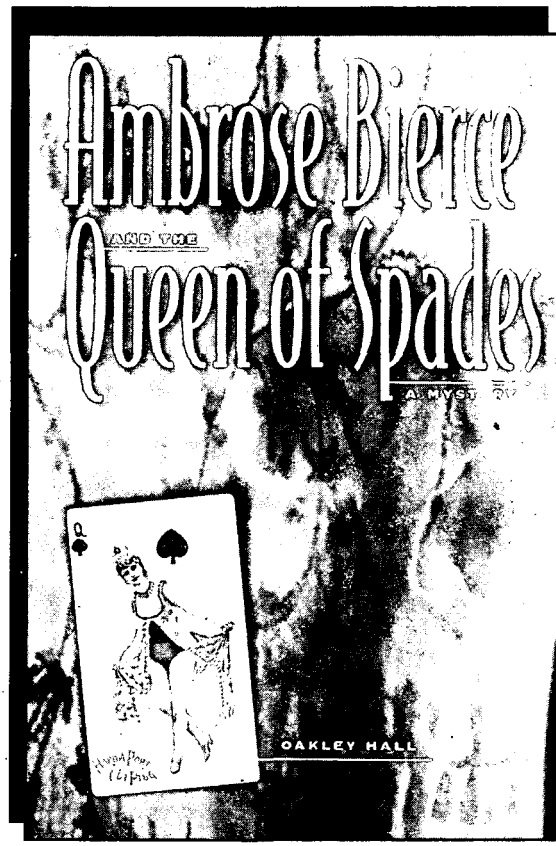
Far in an Eastern Airport
BY GERALD TOMLINSON 133

PUZZLES

THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD
BY RUTH MINARY 46

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Morton Street Slasher has been leaving the corpses of his victims around San Francisco's Union Square. On the women's bodies are spade playing cards...



In a fast-paced novel that is a combination of murder mystery, historical fiction, and quirky biography, Oakley Hall draws the reader into the streets of 1880s San Francisco. Intelligent, gripping, and often quite funny, *Ambrose Bierce and the Queen of Spades* will satisfy any reader who craves mystery, adventure, romance, and fine writing.

"Hall is a novelist who never seems to make a wrong move....He is a writer to read and read again."

—Richard Ford, author of *Independence Day*

$22.95 at bookstores or order 1-800-822-6657

University of California Press

www.ucpress.edu

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Illustration by Mark Evans

UNCHAINED MELODY

by Doug Allyn

"Till death do us part," Shelley sighed. "What a hoot. Why don't they just say till one of you gets bored or gets hot for some brainless little twit with tighter buns."

"Sometimes marriages break up," Gwen Marchand said. "It's no disgrace." She was at her desk, her feet up, watching Shelley pace. The divorce hearing had gone smoothly, no scenes, no last-second motions. Piece of cake. Twenty minutes to flush fifteen years. It was Gwen's sixth divorce case of the week. It was Shelley's first. And the reality that her marriage was truly over was just beginning to sink in.

"I didn't cry," Shelley said, wonderingly. "I thought I might break down and bawl."

"Maybe you're not completely unhappy it's over," Gwen said, glancing at her watch. "We got you a handsome settlement if I do say so myself; you're still young, and you're a successful businesswoman."

"If I hadn't worked so hard at being successful I might still have a marriage. And I'm not young either. I'm thirty-six and feel fifty."

"And your ex is forty-two and trying to act twenty-two. Or eighteen. Look, Shel, I'm your friend and your attorney, in that order. I'm no shrink, but I've seen a lot of divorces. Stop blaming yourself. Nothing

©1998 by Doug Allyn

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you did wrecked your marriage. Leonard hit forty and panicked, that's all. It happens. A lot. Men buy convertibles, cap their teeth, tint what hair they have left, and then dump their wives for younger women. This may sound cold, but the divorce really had very little to do with you. It was all about him."

"You're right. That does sound cold."

"Sorry, but I see this syndrome at least twice a week. It happens a lot. I'm just sorry it happened to you."

"Me, too."

"Yeah, well, maybe it's not such a bad thing, Shel. You've always been so damned serious, so eager to make good, to please your profs or your friends or your husband. I swear to God you only married Leonard to make your folks happy. Okay, you're a free woman now. Why don't you put that overachiever's brain of yours to work on your own needs for a change? You've got your looks and a few bucks. Have some fun, honey. Be happy."

"Happy? Gwen, for the past fifteen years happiness has been closing a deal or getting promoted. I haven't the faintest idea what else it means anymore."

"Well, I hate to advise and run, but I've got a pretrial hearing at four." She hesitated in the doorway. "Tell me something, Shel. Were you always such a grind? I mean, was there ever a time when you had fun? When you were really happy?"

"I'm not sure," Shelley mused. "Maybe there was. Once."

"Unchained Melody" brings back Detroit P.I. "Ax" Axton, a series character we haven't seen in *EQMM* since '96; but the word is that Mr. Allyn is currently working on the first full-length novel in his Dr. David Westbrook series, the veterinarian-sleuth series that has appeared exclusively in *EQMM*. So far, we know only that the book is entitled *The Burning of Rachel Hayes;* we'll let you know the publisher and pub date when we have it. ✝

Papa Henry, the cook at Motown Underground, serves the best barbecued ribs in the city of Detroit, bar none. The jukebox pumps out solid-gold Motown soul which keeps the place jumpin' but even so, Axton spotted Shelley as soon as she walked in.

She was dressed high-fashion casual: a Ralph Lauren denim jacket and jeans, tooled, Tony Lama boots. Mid-thirtyish, with frosted blond hair and anxious eyes. She spotted Ax too, no major feat since he had the only white face in the place. He was dressed in low fashion: leather jacket, jeans, and workboots, rumpled sandy hair and a face scarred in an accident a few years before. She strode directly to his booth.

"Mr. Axton? I'm Shelley Dawson. Sorry to interrupt your lunch. Gwen Marchand suggested I see you and said you'd probably be here if you weren't in your office."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ax nodded. "It's my second home. Sit down, please. I'm just having coffee, would you like some?"

"Nothing, thanks." She glanced around uneasily, but not because of the surroundings, Ax thought.

"I've done a few jobs for Gwen," he offered. "Divorce investigations, mostly. I don't do that kind of work anymore."

"I already have a divorce, Mr. Axton. It was final yesterday, in fact, so I don't need any help in that department. Actually, I'm hoping you can find someone for me."

"Let me guess. Your ex-husband's new playmate?"

"Not at all, I've known her for years. She was his receptionist. I wish them luck. Well, maybe that's not quite true, but I don't wish them harm, at least. No, I want you to find a man I used to know. A boy, really, or at least he was when I knew him. His name is Chet Konerinski."

"Why do you want to find him?"

"Does that matter?"

"It does to me. If he owes you money, I find him one way. If he's wanted by the law, I have to use legal channels and keep the cops informed. And if he's done you dirt and you want his legs broken, I won't find him at all."

"It's nothing like that. He, um, he was my boyfriend. In high school."

"High school?" Ax echoed. "Where and when?"

"Clarkston, twenty years ago."

"Twenty years? First love, first kiss? Something like that?" Ax leaned back in the booth, eyeing her curiously. "You said your divorce was final yesterday. No offense, but maybe you should wait a few weeks to let things shake out, then decide if you still want to hire me."

"I've wasted too much time already, Mr. Axton. Fifteen years of my life. There's nothing sudden about this. I've given it a lot of thought over the past few months. Chet and I were together in high school. Young lovers. I went away to college, Chet went into the army. And we . . . grew apart. I was majoring in business administration and Chet was basically a construction worker. And so I married someone else. A mistake, as it turned out. In my heart, I think I knew it at the time. I just didn't have the courage to go after what I really wanted."

"And now you want to turn back the clock? Suppose he's married?"

"Then good for him and God bless. Look, this isn't quite the romantic gesture it may seem. I've analyzed my life and think I've identified the point where it derailed, a single bad decision. I married the wrong man. I'm fully aware that my emotional equilibrium might be . . . unsteady at the moment, which is why I want facts. I'm also aware that just because Leonard was the wrong man doesn't necessarily make Chet the right one. But I need to settle it for myself, one way or the other. Otherwise, I'll always wonder and I don't much care for uncertainty. Do you follow my logic?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes, ma'am, I think so. You know that song, 'Unchained Melody'? The Righteous Brothers?"

She nodded, puzzled.

"Every time I hear it I get a flash of Janey Gilliland, a girl I was totally hung up on in high school. Puppy love. I've been in love a few times since and I know the difference now. Still, whenever I hear that song, I think of her. 'Unchained Melody.'"

"Do I strike you as the puppy-love type, Mr. Axton?"

"No, ma'am. Far from it."

"Good. Because I'm not and never was. There was nothing puppy about what Chet and I had. It was the most intense experience of my life."

"Then why did you marry someone else?"

"Gwen says I was trying to please my parents. Perhaps she's right. Chet was off playing soldier and Leonard was a rising young attorney with a great future. It seemed like the . . . logical choice at the time. But I also may have been testing Chet's love. If he really cared, he would have come back and tried to carry me off or something. That's another question I'd like answered. Why didn't he? Do you think you can find him?"

"Possibly," Ax said with a shrug. "I can give it a try. Did Gwen tell you my rates?"

She nodded.

"Then I'll need as much information as you can give me: Konerinski's full name, date of birth, Social Security number if you know it, his father's name, any living relatives you can remember, anyplace he ever worked, that sort of thing."

"I assembled all the information I could remember about Chet earlier this morning," she said, fishing an envelope out of her purse, handing it to him. "Your retainer's in there as well."

He opened it, scanned the computer printout, glanced at the check, and smiled. "You're one very efficient lady."

"I know," she said. "That's always been my problem."

The Internet had changed everything. Ax seldom hit the streets to find people anymore. A resourceful, streetwise cyber-surfer, he frequently tracked down a subject in an hour or less, often much less. Sometimes he was almost embarrassed to charge a client for an hour's work when he nailed a skip trace on the first scan.

Not this time, though. Despite his not so common name, Chester Arthur Konerinski was a tough hunt. Ax began with a telephone directory scan beginning in Clarkston, gradually widening the search into nearby area codes. No hits. A dozen Konerinskis, but no Chet. Not even a C.

No cause for panic. Any of the listed Konerinskis might be a relative, but it was too soon to try phoning them. Checking the data Shelley provided, Ax backtracked and scored a hit on Konerinski's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

army discharge, which listed his military serial number, which was also his Social Security number. Using that number, he began scanning the big credit-reporting agencies.

Multiple hits. Credit records at Sears, J.C. Penney's, and a sporting-goods chain. The Sears record was from California, the other two were Chicago, but none was current. Konerinski apparently moved around. Shelley said he'd worked construction. Maybe he was still in that trade.

A check of union membership rolls scored a hit. He'd been a CIO member for three years, but was listed as lapsed years before. In fact, except for his credit records, which were damned sparse, this guy seemed to be all but invisible. That wouldn't be unusual if Konerinski was in the street life, a dope dealer say, or a hood, but that didn't square with the very proper Shelley Dawson's obsession with him.

On a hunch, Ax checked his service number against Social Security payments, and there it was. Chester Arthur Konerinski was on the disabled list. He'd been receiving a partial disability pension since he'd gotten a medical discharge from the army at age twenty-three.

That's why his work record was sparse. He was either too messed up to work or he'd been working jobs that weren't carried on the books to keep from screwing up his pension. The disability payments went to a post-office box, but a single call to a contact with the postal service yielded a home address and his unlisted phone number. Chester Arthur Konerinski lived in a rented home in Dearborn. Ax dialed the number.

"Hello?"

"Is a Mr. Chester Konerinski there, please?"

"Who is this?"

"Mr. Konerinski, I'm Harry Blaine with Continental Septic Tank service. We're running a special—" Click. The line went dead. Bingo. Gotcha.

The address was a brick bungalow in a blue-collar neighborhood: cookie-cutter houses with postage stamp yards, sagging carports, and gravel driveways. Ax guessed the rent would average four or five bills a month, tops, but at least Konerinski wasn't starving. He parked his Camaro on the street and walked to the front door. Noticed a curtain move as he approached. Someone watching?

He pressed the buzzer and the door opened a crack, secured by a chain bolt.

"Mr. Konerinski? My name's Axton. I'm a private investigator." He held up his license to the partially open door. "Could we talk a minute?"

"What's this about?"

"It's a little complicated. Did you know a girl in high school named Shelley Keyes? Her married name's Dawson?"

Konerinski hesitated a moment, then nodded. "Yeah, I remember Shel. What about it?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well, she remembers you, too. She hired me to find you, in fact. Can we talk inside? It's a little chilly out here."

Again the hesitation. "Hang on a sec." Konerinski unfastened the chain bolt and opened the door. He was barefoot, clad in a T-shirt and jeans. Dark hair cropped almost military short. A hard body, lean and muscular, with a hawk nose and wary eyes. He didn't offer to shake hands, but it might not have been a discourtesy. His right hand was a stainless-steel prosthesis attached to a socket and a leather strap midway up his forearm.

"Nice place," Ax said, glancing around. Worn carpeting, cheap vinyl furniture, a TV with a Rent-to-Own sticker on it.

"It's just temporary. Why did Shel want to find me?"

"She said you two dated some in high school, is that right?"

"Actually we were . . . steadies. 'Steadies.' That's a word you don't hear much anymore. We were talkin' about getting married. When she went away to college, I enlisted in the army. She 'Dear Johned' me while I was in the base hospital at Fort Bragg."

"That's where you lost your arm?"

"Yeah. Nothin' heroic about it. We were building a barracks and some moron dropped a pallet of concrete blocks on me."

"Shelley didn't know?"

"Nah. When I got her letter I was hurtin' so bad it almost seemed like a blessing in a way. It was better she dumped me before she saw how I was. One less thing to deal with, you know? My mom wrote me when she got married. I wasn't happy about it but what the hell. I had other things to worry about, like learning to tie my shoes one-handed. Ever try it?"

"Once," Ax nodded. "I cracked up a bike, broke up my right arm pretty bad, got my face rearranged. Has Shelley got any beef with you? Any reason at all to wish you harm?"

"Harm me? Shel? No, why should she?"

"Just being careful. When I hire on to find somebody I like to be sure everything's on the level. Are you still sore about the 'Dear John'?"

"Get real, Axton, it was nearly twenty years ago. Look, what's the bottom line here? What does she want?"

"Just to see you again. Is that okay with you?"

Chet eyed him, reading his face. Then nodded slowly, showing the faintest trace of a smile. "Why not?"

Ax arranged a coffee date at a cafe in Greektown near the Renaissance Center, a place he chose himself. Neutral ground. Plus he could keep an eye on things from a bookshop across the street. He told himself he was taking extra care because Konerinski struck him as a bit of a hard case and Shelley Dawson was at a vulnerable time in her life.

But the truth was, he was curious too. He'd played a lot of roles in his professional life: bouncer, bodyguard, bill collector. But never Cupid.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Chet arrived half an hour early. Ax watched him pace the block slowly, trying to look casual. Finally Chet bought a newspaper at a kiosk on the corner and loitered, pretending to read while keeping an eye on the coffee shop, hoping to see without being seen.

Shelley arrived early, too, by ten minutes. Dressed to the nines, she hurried into the coffee shop, looked around, then took a booth in the window. Chet watched from behind his paper for a while, apparently reluctant to go in now that the moment had come. Ax thought he might leave without seeing her. He didn't.

Instead, he tossed the newspaper in a trash bin, squared his shoulders, and strode into the shop. Shelley rose, smiling, as he entered. And burst into tears when she saw his steel hand.

Ax watched awhile from the bookstore as they talked, gazing into each other's eyes across a tiny Formica table and twenty years. Catching up.

They looked so intense with each other that Ax began to feel like a damned window peeper. But also a little like the Lone Ranger. His work here was done. Time to saddle up and ride off into the sunset to seek out new damsels to rescue. Or maybe some collard-green gumbo and grits. As he walked out to his car he found himself whistling "Unchained Melody." And smiling.

"You should have told me," Shelley said, her voice still unsteady. "I'd have come to you in a heartbeat, you know that."

"I thought I did. Until I got your letter."

"Damn it, Chet, the first six months you were in the army I got exactly one letter, two postcards, and a three A.M. phone call when you were drunk as a skunk and feeling sorry for yourself. I thought you were having the time of your life and you'd forgetten all about me. When I wrote to tell you I was marrying Leonard I half hoped you'd come to my rescue and carry me off."

"Sorry. I wasn't doing much carrying at the time. Still can't, for that matter."

"But why didn't you at least tell me you'd been hurt?"

He shrugged, looking away. "I thought about writing to you but . . . Hell, I was afraid you might come because you felt sorry for me. Or worse, you might not come at all. Frankly, I was already coping with about all the pain I could handle."

"I'm so sorry. If I'd known . . . God. I messed up, didn't I?"

"It was probably for the best, Shel. Look at you, you're . . . elegant. A real lady. Maybe you're going through a rough patch now but your life likely turned out better than anything we would have had together. You were right about me. I was satisfied in the army until the accident, and I've just kinda drifted since."

"Maybe you needed a reason not to. Someone to give you direction. You, um, you never got married?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Nope," he conceded. "Never did. I'm not the marrying type. Lucky for you."

"I don't feel lucky, Chet." She leaned forward, her eyes seeking his. "I feel like I blew our chance back then. I thought I was being practical, doing the smart thing. But it was only the selfish thing. Can you forgive me?"

"Don't be a dope, Shel, there's nothing to forgive anymore. Never was, really. Look, we were teenyboppers with a bad case of hot pants for each other—"

"No, it was more than just sex and you know it. We were in love. Young love, maybe, but that's what it was."

"Okay, maybe it was. But we were only kids. I'm not a kid anymore, Shel, haven't been for a long time. If you think our breakup was a mistake, I'm sorry. I don't see it that way. It's history. *Qué será, será,* as the spicks say."

"You know I hate language like that," she said automatically.

"Actually, I'd forgotten," he said, rising. "There were a couple of things I'd forgotten about. Like how superior you could be. When you went away to college maybe it was no accident I headed the other direction, babe. You were brighter than I was and we both knew it. Ever wonder how I felt about that? Look, it was great to see you again, Shel. Maybe I needed some questions answered too, without even knowing it. Okay, they're settled, no hard feelings. But let's not do it again anytime soon, okay? I'll see you around."

"Chet, wait!" She grabbed his wrist, flinched at the touch of cold metal but held on. "Look at me. Can you honestly say you don't still have some feelings for me?"

He started to speak, then shook his head and gently disengaged her hand from his stainless-steel wrist. "Let it go, Shel. You did the right thing all those years ago, believe me. Take care of yourself."

He turned and stalked out of the cafe and didn't look back. Shelley crumpled, awash in a tidal wave of regrets: the divorce, the mistakes she'd made over the years, but especially, blowing her chance with Chet. All over again.

No. She hadn't. He'd walked away from her, that was all. The way she'd left him the last time. So they were even. But that didn't mean it was over. If she'd learned one lesson from the business world, it was never to take no for an answer.

She hurried out of the cafe and spotted him disappearing around the corner two blocks up. Throwing her pride to the wind, she sprinted after him, but as she rounded the corner she barreled into a businessman, sending them both sprawling to the sidewalk.

"Jesus, lady, what's the rush?" The man helped her up as passers-by eyed them curiously. Past his shoulder she saw Chet climb into a Cadillac Seville at the far end of the block and pull away into the stream of traffic.

"Are you okay? You ought to be more careful."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Wrong," Shelley said, taking a deep breath. "I've been too careful for too darned long already."

Papa Henry's was nearly empty, which suited Ax just fine. He ordered a slab of baby back ribs and a Killian's Red at the counter, then wandered to the juke box in the corner and scanned the titles for "Unchained Melody." He was fumbling for some change when Papa edged up beside him at the box, three hundred pounds of muscle, gristle, and attitude jammed into a chef's outfit. Papa'd learned to cook in 3000 Cooper Street, Jackson prison, and still talked out of the side of his mouth in a prison-yard whisper, inaudible to eavesdroppers.

"Who you got pissed off at you, Ax?"

"Nobody special I know of. Why?"

"Two guys were in earlier askin' about you. Mexican gangbangers from Saginaw. Calera and Salazar. Know 'em?"

"Not that I recall."

"Better think harder. I know Cholo Salazar from the gray-bar motel. Skinny dude, built like a snake and twice as mean. He was carryin' iron, kept gropin' it when he asked about you."

"What did he want to know?"

"The book. Who you are, what you're into, if you're mobbed up with anybody heavy."

"What'd you tell him?"

"That I serve ribs and greens here, but I might add a taco fricassee to the menu if he asked me any more dumb-ass questions. Said you were righteous and to take his act on the road."

"How'd he react?"

"No problem for me. Might be for you, though. Them boys are both pros. You sure you don't know 'em from somewhere?"

"Never heard of them," Ax said, genuinely baffled. "But it sounds like I'd best check 'em out. Do me a favor, Papa, change my rib order to a sandwich to go, will you? I'd better get back to the office."

Salazar was easy to find. Ax pulled up the Law Enforcement Information Network on his computer, punched in Salazar, nickname Cholo, and immediately got multiple hits. The guy's life would've made a dozen dandy gangsta-rap videos. Juvy convictions for grand theft auto and assault, three adult falls for armed robbery that added up to a dozen years hard time, including the stretch at Jackson he'd spent with Papa.

Calera offered more of a challenge because there were a half-dozen Caleras on the LEIN net. Ax quickly zeroed in on a Juan Orozco Calera convicted with Salazar of an '87 credit-union holdup in Midland.

Bad guys, no doubt about it. Serious hoods. He enlarged their mug shots on-screen and scanned them closely. Dead, cell-block eyes, pitted faces, mean/ugly enough to be brothers. Not pans you'd forget. Which was why Ax was damn sure he'd never set eyes on either of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

them before. So why were they looking for him?

Collecting debts from lowlifes occasionally got Axton crossways of gangsters, but he hadn't worked the Saginaw area for nearly a year. Most of his current cases were cut and dried, gambling debts or skip traces. Nothing to get hung about. The only new thing . . .

He punched Chester Arthur Konerinski into the LEIN. And there it was. Damn. Multiple hits, the guy had a major sheet. No wonder he hadn't found much of a work record for him. He'd taken extensive vacations from the job market for jail terms in Milan and Jackson. His most recent stretch coincided with Salazar's. And for the same crime, robbery while armed. They had to know each other.

Ax sagged back in his chair. Sweet Jesus. Shelley Dawson hired him to find her long-lost puppy love, and he'd hooked her up with a freakin' ex-con bank robber.

Maybe it wasn't too late. He flipped through his Rolodex and called Shelley's home phone. Got a recording. Left a "call me ASAP" message. Tried Gwen Marchand next; another recording. Terrific. Just terrific.

Shelley thought about showing up on Chet's doorstep wearing nothing at all. A fur coat, high heels, maybe a red ribbon at her throat. Gift-wrapped. The image made her laugh aloud. She owned a fur coat, but as for the rest, she'd always been more comfortable making love in the dark, even on her honeymoon. And after Leonard had put on weight, the darker the better.

It was taking all of her courage just to show up at Chet's home unannounced. He'd all but said he never wanted to see her again, but he was angry when he said it. Well, he had a right to be. She'd dumped him all those years ago and she'd flinched when she touched his steel wrist. He was probably afraid of being rejected again, that's all. He still cared for her. She was sure of it. Well, almost. Okay, maybe not sure at all.

Hell, who was she kidding? The only thing she was certain of was that if she didn't stop driving past the address listed in Axton's report, she'd lose heart altogether. She guided her station wagon to the curb, sat there a moment to get her breathing under control, then got out and marched up to the door of the shabby brick bungalow.

As Shelley reached for the doorbell, she hesitated. She could hear the murmur of voices inside. Did he have company? Another woman? This was crazy. Find a phone and call him first before you make a complete fool of yourself.

She turned to leave and bumped up against a skinny Latin with acne-scarred cheekbones and snake eyes.

"Go on in, lady." He yanked open the front door and thrust her into the living room. Four men kneeling around a coffee table jumped up, startled as she stumbled in: Chet, a bullet-headed black, a hulking teen in a black Megadeth T-shirt, and a rat-faced Latin with a goatee.

"Found her outside," Salazar said, holding Shel's arm in an iron grip.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"She drove past two, three times, casin' the house. Anybody know her?"

"She's nobody," Chet said. "An old girlfriend."

"The one who hired that dick to find you?" Salazar snapped. "You said you blew her off. So why's she here?"

"She ain't here about anything," Chet said. "I'll take care of it. Come on, Shel."

"She ain't goin' noplace, man, she's seen too much already," Salazar snapped, gesturing at the building diagram on the coffee table. "I ain't doin' no more time just because you can't keep your wanger zipped up."

"Please," Shelley said shakily, "I don't know what's going on, I—"

"Until maybe you see some reward money on TV and decide to rat us out," Salazar snarled. "You're stayin', bitch, and that's it."

"Chet, please," Shel pleaded. "I just want to go home."

Chet scanned the hard-eyed group around the table, but found no allies. "Sorry, Shel," he said, shaking his head. "I told you to give it up. You should've listened."

"Good, it's settled," Salazar said, "and since we got us a share and share alike deal goin' here, the only question is how you wanna put it out, lady. Easy or hard?"

"No, that's not the question," Ax said softly, sliding out of the darkened kitchen, a Browning nine-millimeter centered on Salazar's midsection. "The question is whether you'll still be breathin' in five seconds. Don't do anything sudden, Cholo, just let her go. If everybody stays cool, nobody has to bleed." Ax circled around Salazar and jammed the gun muzzle against his ribcage.

"This is how it's gonna go, guys. None of you are wanted right now or the heat would be kickin' in the door already. But they know who you are and that you're here, so whatever you're planning is pretty much blown, you know? I'd cut my losses and bag it if I were you, but you can decide that after the lady and I split."

"You're goin' nowhere!" Salazar snapped. "You can't take all of us."

"That won't matter to you, Cholo. You won't be around to see it. C'mon, don't be stupid. It's over. Let her go."

For a frozen moment, Ax thought Salazar might be crazy enough to try him. He wasn't. He shrugged and released Shel. She stumbled toward Axton, eyes streaming, confused.

"My car's out front," he said, keeping his tone conversational. "The silver Camaro. Go on, I'll be along in a minute."

Shel tottered out. "I'm leaving now," Ax said. "If anybody comes through that door after us I'll empty a clip into this place and leave you boys to explain that bank diagram on the table to the law."

"We know who you are, Axton," Salazar said. "And where you live."

"I'm not hard to find," Ax admitted, backing toward the door. "But there's no percentage in it, man. Be more trouble than it's worth. Besides, you got no real beef with me. Chet here's the one who whizzed in your punch bowl. Maybe you'll wanna talk to him about it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

after I'm outa here. Y'all take care now."

He backed out the open door without lowering his piece, and then he was gone. No one moved until they heard the car rumble off in the dark. Then Salazar started for the bedroom.

"Where are you going?" Chet asked uneasily.

"To pack," Cholo said. "Man's right, this deal's over. Or it will be after we settle up with you, chump."

In the car, Shelley listened numbly as Ax explained that Chet Konerinski'd spent the past fifteen years as a stickup artist or a prison yardbird. She was so quiet he thought she might be in shock, but when she spoke her voice was remarkably level.

"I feel like a total fool," she said, wiping her eyes with her wrist.

"You? Hell, Shelley, you weren't the one who screwed up, I was. You hired me to check out Konerinski. I blew it."

"I hired you to *find* him," she corrected. "And you did. And I would have been in a lot of trouble if you hadn't shown up when you did. Actually, it could have been even crazier than it was. I, um, I almost arrived on Chet's doorstep in a fur coat."

"A coat? I don't follow you."

"It doesn't matter. Maybe I'll tell you about it sometime."

"Look, the bottom line is, you'd never have gone there if I'd done my job right. The problem was, you seem like such a civilized type it never occurred to me to run Konerinski through the law-enforcement net. His work record was uneven, but I assumed that was because of his bad arm. This mess is on me, Shelley. It was totally my fault."

"Okay, fine. You blew it, Axton, and saving my neck doesn't alter the fact that you're an incompetent schmuck. There, is that better?"

"Not really." Ax smiled. "Are you all right?"

"I'm a little shaky. It happened so fast I didn't really have time to get scared. I'll probably be a basket case tomorrow, but . . . in a way it's almost funny."

"What is?"

"I've felt more alive in the past few days than I have for years. I'd forgotten how it feels to be young. To lead with my heart instead of my head. Even as bad as things turned out, I'm not sorry I tried. Does that sound crazy?"

"Completely."

"Really? Aren't you the guy who remembers a girl you dated in high school every time you hear a certain song? What was it?"

"'Unchained Melody,'" he admitted.

"I rest my case, Mr. Tough-guy. I don't think you've outgrown all that 'love, true love' nonsense any more than I have."

"Maybe not. Not yet, anyway."

"But you think we will? Eventually?"

He glanced at her a moment, then slowly shook his head. "I hope not," he said. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pool of Tears

by Donald Olson

Donald Olson is the author of four novels but, fortunately for *EQMM*, he much prefers the short story form. Mr. Olson writes a type of story that is becoming something of an endangered species—a "cozy"; to wit, a story set in a place or involving a sector of society in which violence is not the norm but an extraordinary event. The following story is a perfect example: two elderly sisters on a quiet farm, with a plot about to hatch that could result in murder! ✝

It was Binty Kinship, gone to feed the chickens, who discovered a naked man in the henhouse.

Dressed in her workday gingham, with her iron-gray hair in its usual plaited coronet and with a gladness in her eye at the freshness of the summer morning, Binty approached the henhouse door only to find it ajar, the four chickens (rest of the brood having been slaughtered by that wily, elusive fox) pecking about in the tall grass.

Binty opened the door wider. A man, naked as Adam before the Fall, lay sprawled on the straw-covered floor of the henhouse. Had Binty's sister Dinah made the awful discovery she would doubtless have screamed her head off, or fainted. Binty was made of stronger stuff. Quickly but calmly she stepped back and latched the door shut.

Less excitedly than if she'd found one of the hens had laid a golden egg, she marched back into the house where Dinah, like her sister in appearance if not in temperament, stood at the kitchen sink washing up the breakfast dishes.

Binty looked at her and said, "There's a naked man in the henhouse."

Dinah didn't even look around. "Too early in the morning for jokes."

"I mean it. There's a naked man in the henhouse. I think he's dead."

"Silly girl." They were both in their late sixties. "You've never in your life seen a naked man."

"Well, neither have you, smartie, but that don't mean I wouldn't know one if I saw him. Come along. See for yourself."

Dinah dried her hands and followed Binty out across the farmyard to the henhouse. Binty unlatched the door and eased it open. Dinah's hand flew to her mouth.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The man lay on his side, one arm outstretched, the other pillowing a head of longish blond hair.

Dinah, whose imagination was as virginal and unlimited by life as when she was a girl, appeared more awestruck than alarmed. "He looks . . . he's quite . . . like Adonis."

Except for the *Alice* books, her favorite childhood reading had been *Tales of the Greek Myths.* Binty, whose head had no room for such nonsense, sniffed her disapproval. "Adonis, my foot. I know very well who he is. I'd bet my life on it."

"Sister! You don't mean—"

"Fits, don't it?" The evening before, two sheriff's deputies had come to the door with news of an attempted bank robbery in Prewittville. The would-be robber had escaped into the surrounding woods and everyone was being warned to be on the lookout for him.

"I don't believe it," said Dinah. "He don't look like a bandit. He's too young."

"Not that young."

Dinah grabbed Binty's arm. "You're wrong about one thing. He's not dead. Look at his chest. He's only asleep."

Binty lowered her voice. "You stay here. Don't move. I'll be right back."

Which she soon was, with a shotgun cradled in one arm, a patchwork quilt over the other. Stepping closer, she nudged the sleeping figure with her foot and at the same time flung the quilt across him. The man awoke with a cry and raised himself on one elbow. Startled blue eyes looked straight into the barrel of Binty's shotgun, which so far had proved less effective than poison against those marauding foxes.

"Who are you?" demanded Binty. "What are you doing here?"

Clutching the quilt to his midriff, the young man sank back with an air of resignation. "I needed a place to sack out."

"You're him, aren't you? Don't lie. One the police are after."

"Says who?" This in a tone of halfhearted defiance.

"They were here last night. Why are you—unclothed?"

The young man looked from Binty to Dinah. Deciding he was not about to be shot, he uttered a weary groan of despair. "I thought I was safe in the woods. I was hot and sweaty. There's this big pond. I shed my clothes and gave myself a wash. Then two of 'em popped up other side of the pond. I jumped out and hightailed it into the woods. Didn't even fumble around for my duds. I come out of the woods back there and crept into the henhouse. Look, you don't gotta worry none. Ain't never hurt no one, 'specially old ladies."

"We're not *that* old, thank you," Dinah retorted, her vanity no more impaired than her imagination.

"Get yourself up," ordered Binty. "We'll go in the house and call the sheriff. And don't try anything. I know how to use this." She gave him a smart nudge with the gun barrel as he scrambled to his feet, wrapped the quilt around himself, and marched in front of Binty across the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

farmyard to the kitchen door. Dinah opened it and stood aside.

"Sit down at the table," Binty snapped. "Sister, you go in the other room and call the sheriff."

"Wait a sec." The young man looked up at her pleadingly. "Look, you got me all wrong. Honest. I'm sorry I broke into your henhouse. I'm sorry I scared you. I'm not a thug. Hell, I'm not even a bank robber. I never tried anything like that before in my life. I only done it because . . . look, just hear me out, okay? Please?"

With the morning sunlight flooding the kitchen, the two women took time to inspect their captive properly. Dinah was right, he didn't *look* like a bank robber. If they hadn't known better they would have described him as a "very nice-looking boy." Boy at least to them, for he must have been in his twenties, yet with all the freshness of youth about him. His features were good and his manner, with its mixture of toughness and gentility, betrayed a defenseless sort of earnestness. Dinah could not but like what she saw. "You must be hungry. When did you eat last?"

"Dinah!" Binty gave her sister a withering glance.

"Well, really, what harm can it do to feed the poor lad? Can't we at least listen to what he has to say for himself before we call the sheriff?"

The young man smiled for the first time. "I ain't had a morsel in twenty-four hours."

"Go on then," said Binty. "Feed him if you like. But he's not pulling the wool over my eyes." And as if to assure him of that, she drew a chair over to the wall and sat as stiffly as a prison guard with the shotgun across her lap.

"So you can see how I felt, can't you?" The young man had told them his name was Elwood Chappel but that family and friends had always called him Chappie. Having done justice to Dinah's farm-hand breakfast with all the zest of a protester coming off a hunger strike, he'd plunged as eagerly into the tale of his abortive bank robbery.

His motive, he insisted, was not greed but an attempt to pay the bank back for what it had done to his grandfather, who had brought him up.

"Granddaddy was hurt in the war, walked with a limp, but could work harder than ten men on a chain gang. He built that farmhouse with his own hands. Then he took sick and had all them bills. But he never lost his spunk. Not till the goddamn bank shafted him. Foreclosed on the farm. I was in the Navy when I got word he'd died. Right then and there I made up my mind first thing I'd do when I got out was give that bank a taste of its own medicine. Rob it, that's what I'd do."

He regarded Dinah with the look of an unjustly whipped puppy. "Only it didn't work out like I planned. And that's how I ended up in your henhouse. So I guess you better just call the sheriff and let 'em do what they want with me. Maybe if you'd known my granddaddy you'd understand why I done what I done. If you

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

knew what it was like to be tossed out of your own home . . ."

By this time Binty had relaxed her grip on the shotgun and Dinah was almost in tears. "But, Chappie," she cried, "we *do* know how he felt. We know exactly how he felt."

"You do?" Chappie greeted this outburst of sympathy with wide-eyed surprise.

"Yes! Same thing's happening to us. Tell him, Binty. Tell him about Sybil."

Binty put her shotgun aside and pulled her chair back to the table. "Never you mind about Sybil. That's our problem. Thing to decide is what we do about *him.*"

"But we won't call the sheriff. We won't do that, will we, Binty?"

"All depends."

"On what, ma'am?" asked Chappie hopefully.

Binty rose from the table. "We'll think on it while you take a proper bath. No offense, but there's a distinct smell of the henhouse about you."

Dinah was all smiles now, though plainly she didn't quite know what to make of this sudden change in Binty's attitude toward the fugitive. "He'll have to put on something besides that quilt," she said. "All we've got is women's clothes."

Binty remembered an old pair of dungarees in the cedar chest in the attic. "And that plaid shirt that was always too big for you ought to fit him. We'll worry about shoes later. He can go barefoot for now. He won't be going anyplace right away."

"Oh, Binty, you mean he can stay?"

"Like I said, that depends. You show him upstairs, then come back down here. You and me, we've got some talking to do."

Dinah had lapsed into an apprehensive silence as they sat around the round oak table in the dining room. Binty, on the other hand, with a gleam in her eye and a firmness of command in her voice, wasted no time on preliminaries.

"You're going to need our help, Chappie, if you're to get out of this with a whole skin. You know that, don't you?"

"Sure do, ma'am. I can't tell you how grateful I am to you all." Bathed and dressed, Chappie looked presentable enough for Sunday school. Being unshaven didn't really matter, his beard being as blond as his hair.

"We'll see about that," said Binty. "Point is, we've decided to trust you. If that's a mistake, you're the one who'll be picking buckshot out of your tail."

"You can trust me, ma'am. I'll swear to that on my granddaddy's grave."

"So be it. I've decided to tell you about our little problem. About Grace. And Sybil."

"Grace was our big sister," said Dinah. "A lot older than us. She

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

really brought us up after Mama died."

"The farm was left to Grace," Binty explained. "When Grace got married, her husband came here to live with us. He was a feed dealer. Not rich, but well off. They had a child, a daughter, Sybil. And a proper little brat *she* was."

"Nasty child," agreed Dinah. "Spoiled rotten by her daddy."

"Sybil hated this place. Fell in love with the bright lights and took off when she was sixteen. Near broke her mother's heart. This was soon after Grace's husband got run over by a freight train. Poor Grace was never herself after that."

Dinah took up the story. "That was over twenty years ago. When her health failed we took care of Grace. Sybil? Grace was lucky if she got so much as a postcard from that one now and then. Ended up living with some man in Mexico, last we heard. Never came home, even when she knew her mama was at death's door. While she was in her right mind Grace promised to leave us the farm and what she had in the bank, which was not chicken feed. Only then her mind went around the bend and she never did get around to changing her will."

As Chappie listened with a deeply attentive look on his face, tears gathered in Dinah's eyes. "When our sister died three months ago, Sybil never came back for the funeral. Why, she didn't even send so much as a potted plant! Can you believe that?"

"And then we get a letter from her," said Binty. "She'd been in touch with her mama's lawyer. Said she'd be coming home soon as the will was probated and letters ready to be signed. Said she'd be here just long enough to sell the farm and claim her inheritance."

Dinah's voice echoed her sister's outrage. "We figured she'd at least let us stay on here till we died. Oh no. Forget that. She sent us a terrible letter when we wrote her about it. Said we'd lived off her mother for twenty years and now we could shift for ourselves. Imagine!"

Chappie looked quite as indignant as the sisters. "Sounds like a class-A bitch, I'd say."

"Shift for ourselves," said Binty. "You know what that means. The County Home."

"We'd rather be six feet under than end up in the County Home."

"But you're still here," Chappie said.

"Waiting for the axe to fall," said Binty. "You see, Chappie, Sybil did come home. Soon's the papers were ready to be signed. She got off the bus in Prewittville three days ago."

"Came straight here," added Dinah, "fuming like a steam engine because there's no taxi service and she had to hoof it from the station in the rain."

Chappie's open young face began to betray a mounting bewilderment. "Come and gone then, has she?"

Binty and Dinah exchanged looks. "Well, you might say that," said Binty consideringly.

"You mean she's still here?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well . . . you might say that, too."

A weighty silence, and then, as if having reached a point of no return in the conversation, Binty nodded toward the window. "To be frank, Chappie, Sybil's in the Pool of Tears."

Dinah smiled at Chappie's obvious puzzlement. "Don't you remember your *Alice?"*

"Alice?"

"In Wonderland! It was always Mama's favorite book. Grace's, too. Remember when Alice grew nine feet tall and started to cry and almost drowned in a pool of her own tears? The Pool of Tears. That's what Mama called the pond in the woods."

By now Chappie appeared lost in the woods of incomprehension. "You mean Sybil drowned—"

"No, no," Binty sighed heavily. "There was this awful accident. When Sybil got here she was in a real foul mood, having walked all the way from the bus station in the rain. We tried to reason with her. We asked her very nicely about staying on at the farm, leastways until it was sold. She wouldn't even listen. We had one humdinger of a row."

Dinah clapped her hands. "You should have seen Binty! She was wonderful. Took that old shotgun off the wall and pointed it right at Sybil. 'You're the one can get out,' she said. 'You can turn yourself around and go straight on back to Prewittville and take a room in the hotel.' Sybil turned red as a beet and swore like a sailor. She tried to grab the gun away from Binty. They were pulling and tugging at it when it went off."

"I shot her dead," said Binty. "Lord knows I didn't mean to. It just happened. One minute she was cursing her fool head off; next minute she was dead as a fox after eating one of Dinah's chokecherry tarts."

Chappie recalled only dimly reading *Alice* as a boy. He did remember something about Alice falling down an endless rabbit hole, which was precisely the way he felt now.

"You're putting me on . . . right? It didn't really happen. You didn't really—kill her."

"Well, the gun killed her," said Binty reasonably. "But I was holding it, so I guess you'd have to say I was responsible."

Dinah said they hadn't known what to do after that. "Finally we decided to tie an old anvil around her legs and dump her in the pond. Just pretend she'd never shown up here."

Chappie's mouth fell open but he didn't say anything.

"You can picture how scared we were," said Dinah, "when the sheriff's men came pounding on the door last night. We thought it had something to do with Sybil."

Like a nurse monitoring a traumatized patient, Binty registered the play of emotions across Chappie's face. "So you see, we're all in a right old pickle. That's what I meant when I said we'd help you if you help us."

"What do you mean, ma'am? How can *I* help you?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"That," replied Binty, "is what I'm about to explain."

It must be said that a fair amount of urging was required before Chappie would agree to what Binty proposed. "A damfool crazy idea," is what he called it. His other choice, however, to flee the farm as a penniless fugitive, seemed on balance to present no less a risk than to do what Binty's plan required.

Which was to impersonate Sybil.

It was the money that tipped the scale. Binty promised Chappie half the amount still in sister Grace's bank account. Not a fortune, by any means, but still a very hefty piece of change. That the money was in the bank he'd failed to rob tickled his funny bone. Asking the bank for money rather than stealing it held an irresistible appeal.

"Sybil—meaning you, Chappie—will tell the lawyer you've changed your mind about selling the farm, at least for now. Meaning, ha ha, forever."

Chappie was positive the sisters must have overlooked a few things. Like wouldn't someone start asking questions when Sybil never returned to wherever she came from?

"Let 'em," said Binty. "All we can tell anyone is that she came here, saw the lawyer, drew the money from the bank, and took off."

And no, he needn't worry about the impersonation being detected. Sybil hadn't been back in over twenty years. No one in Prewittville—lawyer, bankers, or townsfolk—had any idea what she looked like now. "Any more than we did," said Binty.

Chappie's strongest doubt involved his ability to carry off the imposture. Dinah and Binty quickly put his fears to rest.

"Luckily, you're not a big strapping fellow with a crewcut. You've that lovely long blond hair and you'll fit nicely, with proper padding, into the outfit we'll pick up in town for you. And we mustn't forget a razor and makeup. You'll have to practice speaking softly and wiggling your fanny when you walk. As they say on TV, a piece of cake."

Chappie was still doubtful. "What if they ask for ID? What did you do with Sybil's stuff? She must have had credit cards. Driver's license? What did you do with—I mean, after you, you know . . ."

Binty spread her hands. "Pool of Tears."

"Shouldn't be a problem," said Dinah. "Sybil's birth certificate is in Grace's strongbox. And we'll be there to vouch for you."

"It'll never work," sighed Chappie. "I just know it won't."

But it did. Both at the lawyer's and at the bank they were greeted with wholly unsuspecting courtesy. A slight awkwardness did arise when "Sybil" insisted on withdrawing the money from the savings account in cash.

"Most unwise," warned the assistant bank manager. "That's a great deal of money. I'm sure a cashier's check—"

"You're right, I know," agreed Chappie in the low-pitched sultry

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

voice he'd practiced so diligently under Binty's coaching. "But you see, I've never had that much money—I mean *real* money—in my whole life. Money I can actually hold in my hands. When I stop in New York on my way home, I'll convert it into something safe. What I don't spend. Ha ha."

The banker could not prevail upon them to see reason and fifteen minutes later they were walking out of the bank with a tote bag full of cash.

Dinah had remained at home. She hadn't her sister's iron nerves, and Binty had thought it best she not accompany them. When they arrived, breathless and jubilant, back at the farm, they found Dinah removing a tray of tarts from the oven. Once Chappie and Binty had given her a full account of their triumph, Chappie rushed upstairs to change clothes, returning to the kitchen to declare the nervous stress of the adventure had given him a ferocious appetite.

As he reached for one of the tarts on the counter, Binty playfully slapped his wrist. "No, no, dear boy. Eat one of them and you'll have more than a bellyache."

"Chokecherry tarts," said Dinah. "Our latest weapon in the war with the foxes. The stones and withered leaves are poisonous. Contain cyanide. We grind 'em up and bake them in tarts."

"Does it work?" Chappie asked.

"Oh yes. If they gobble enough of 'em. I bake a batch every day. Plenty of chokecherries out back of the barn."

"But why tarts?"

Dinah grinned. "Homage to *Alice.* Remember? *The Queen of Hearts she baked some tarts, all on a summer day.* That's me, the Queen of Hearts!"

Not for the first time, Chappie felt there might be something sadly sinister about this Wonderland into which he'd strayed.

Two days later the sisters drove Chappie, suitably disguised, into Prewittville and put him on a bus out of town. The parting was tearful, at least on Dinah's part. Anyone watching might have assumed the two elderly ladies were bidding goodbye to a favorite nephew.

Still, it was a great relief to see him on his way. Chappie had promised to drop them a card when he arrived at whatever final destination he chose. As the ladies climbed into Grace's old car to return to the farm, Dinah pinched Binty's arm. "No doubt about it, Sister," she said. "You're a genius."

One pleasant summer evening a week later, as the sisters sat watching a Lawrence Welk rerun on TV, the sound of a car stopping in the farmyard reached their ears, soon followed by a knock at the door. They looked at each other and smiled, a smile rather like that of the Cheshire cat in *Alice.* Dinah went to the door.

The blond woman looked Dinah up and down. "It's been a long time. So which one are you? Aunt Binty or Aunt Dinah?" Dinah managed a very creditable pretense of fainting.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

❖ ❖ ❖

A fox in the henhouse could not have created a greater furor than did Sybil when she learned what had happened.

"But Sybil, dear," protested Binty, feigning consternation, "how could we have known she was an impostor? We were expecting you, and there she was. Why, in all these years you never sent your mama so much as a snapshot. How could we know what you looked like now?"

"Any nincompoop might have figured that out," raged Sybil, eyes on fire. "It makes no sense at all. How could she have known about me and why I was coming here?"

Dinah smiled sweetly. "You mean you told *no one* about your inheritance? Not a soul?"

"Well, of course I told people. Who wouldn't? But the sort of people I know wouldn't dream of pulling a crazy stunt like that."

"Well, we wouldn't presume to know what sort of *friends* you have, but someone certainly took advantage of the situation."

Sybil finally stopped pacing the floor and flung herself down on the sofa, blood-red fingernails raking her stringy blond hair. "It's insane. Something's very fishy here. I suppose it's too late now, but first thing in the morning we're all making a trip to the sheriff's office. I'll get to the bottom of this, you can bet on that. Right now I'm too tired to think straight."

Without accepting so such as a cup of hot milk to soothe her nerves, Sybil stormed out of the house, fetched her bag from the car, and allowed Binty to show her to her room. A few minutes later the sisters, too, went off to bed.

"Vile creature," whispered Binty in the darkness of their bedroom. "I sort of wish we *had* killed her."

Dinah chuckled. "We couldn't have, you know that. Foxes, yes, but not a human vixen, no matter how detestable . . . Binty? No one can prove we *weren't* duped, can they?"

"I don't see how. Trusting old ladies are always being duped."

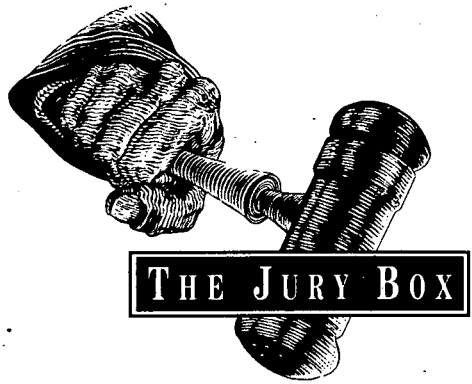
"So are trusting young men. How on earth could he have believed two old sweeties like us could *kill* anyone?"

With a smile in her voice, Binty said they should have been actresses. "Like the Gish sisters. We might have made a fortune."

Far too distraught to sleep despite her weariness, Sybil realized in the middle of the night that she hadn't had a thing to eat since morning. Slipping out of bed, she padded down the stairs to the kitchen. She opened the refrigerator and poured herself a glass of milk. Spotting a platter of tarts covered in waxed paper, she reached for one, then decided to help herself to the whole platter before retreating to her room.

With something in her stomach, she thought, sleep might still be possible. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



by Jon L. Breen

Those who believe the ideal length for a work of crime or mystery fiction is not the increasingly long-winded novel but the more pointed and economical short story can offer as evidence the contents of several 1998 anthologies and single-author collections. The two annual compilations of the previous year's best stories have little agreement about the highlights of 1997. But given the strength of the year's output and the good taste of both sets of editors, this disparity is more cause for rejoicing than quibbling.

In its second year, *The Best American Mystery Stories* (Houghton Mifflin, $25) includes twenty stories selected by guest editor Sue Grafton from fifty shortlisted by series editor Otto Penzler. In its seventh appearance, *The Year's 25 Finest Crime and Mystery Stories* (Carroll & Graf, $25), edited by Ed Gorman and Martin H. Greenberg, bookends its selections with an introduction by me and an invaluable yearbook feature, including bibliographies of collections and secondary sources and a necrology, by Edward D. Hoch. Only three stories overlap the two volumes: Lawrence Block's dazzling Edgar-winner "Keller on the Spot"; John Lutz's *EQMM* story "Night Crawlers," a gnawingly suspenseful case for Florida private eye Fred Carver; and Donald E. Westlake's typically deft and amusing "Take It Away." Three writers appear in both collections with different stories: Stuart Kaminsky with two Edgar nominees about another Florida P.I., Lew Fonesca, "Find Miriam" (*Best American*) and "The Man Who Beat the System" (*Year's 25*) (advantage *Best American*); Walter Mosley with "Black Dog" (*Best American*) and "Crimson Shadow" (*Year's 25*), both about the hard-to-classify Socrates Fortlow (advantage *Year's 25*); and Joyce Carol Oates with "Faithless" (*Best American*) and "Death Cup" (*Year's 25*) (narrow advantage *Best American*). The remaining two Edgar nominees, Jeffrey Deaver's *EQMM* story "The Kneeling Soldier," a tricky stalker tale that could easily have been spun into a

©1998 by Jon L. Breen

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

full-length novel, and Simon Brett's satirical "Ways to Kill a Cat," appear only in *Year's 25.* (Brett, being British, was ineligible for *Best American.*)

***** Lawrence Block: *Hit Man,* Morrow, $22. Though this book appears to be in the time-honored if recently rare publishing practice of disguising a short-story collection as a novel, you could argue the ten linked stories tracing the professional career and evolving outlook of murderer-for-hire Keller, most of which first appeared in *Playboy,* add up to an episodic novel. In whatever guise, it's one of the great books of '90s crime fiction. Besides being written and plotted with Block's customary brilliance, it will leave the thoughtful reader pondering: Why are we so easily able to like and identify with an amoral killer?

**** Joyce Carol Oates: *The Collector of Hearts: New Tales of the Grotesque,* Dutton, $23.95. Though three of the twenty-seven stories first appeared in *EQMM,* this extraordinary collection runs more to supernatural and/or psychological horror than to straight crime stories. One of the latter is my favorite in the book: the subtle and chilling "Labor Day." The very prolific Oates is able to assume a wide variety of styles and voices: though there are a fair number of middle-aged academics among her central characters, the title story (from *Seventeen*) is believably narrated by an African-American teenage girl.

**** Donald Thomas: *The Secret Cases of Sherlock Holmes,* Carroll & Graf, $24. Between the preface, in which he assumes the voice of Dr. Watson with rare authority, and a concluding historical note, Thomas presents seven stories involving Holmes in such real life events as the disappearance of the Irish crown jewels, the Dreyfuss case, and the alleged morganatic marriage of George the Fifth. Thomas, who wrote the Sgt. Verity novels under the pseudonym Francis Selwyn, may in this remarkable melding of fact and fiction have written the best volume of Holmes pastiches ever published.

**** Peter Lovesey: *Do Not Exceed the Stated Dose,* Crippen & Landru, P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23505; $16 trade paper, $40 signed limited clothbound. Two of Lovesey's series detectives, the historical Bertie (i.e. the Prince of Wales, later Edward VII) and the contemporary Peter Diamond appear here in two strong stories each, but the remaining eleven non-series tales, many from *EQMM,* full of darkly amusing situations and inventive twists, may be even better. You'll be tempted to ignore the author's advice to read only one or two at a sitting. Lovesey is one of the genre's best at any length.

** Bruce Martin: *Martin's MINI Mysteries,* Creative Consortium, 4850 Marieview Court, Cincinnati, OH 45236-2012; $19.95. Martin deploys some clever plot gimmicks and cute reversals on standard situations in a lowkey, pleasurable collection that often draws on his hiking, teaching, and barbershop quartet experiences. My favorite was "Elderhostile," a variation on the murder-game-gone-wrong narrated by a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nine-year-old boy. The seventeen stories and ten poems, mostly limericks, add up not to a great collection but a very likeable one. (In the present market, it's oddly refreshing to see a volume of mystery fiction being promoted as "plot-driven" rather than "character-driven"!)

**** Thomas H. Cook: *Instruments of Night,* Bantam, price unknown. The author of *Breakheart Hill* and the Edgar-winning *The Chatham School Affair* returns with another novel of past crime recalled and examined in the present—but the resemblance (aside from Cook's masterful style and uncanny touch with a complex plot structure) ends there. Mystery writer Paul Graves, a melancholy loner obsessed with a childhood tragedy, is asked to examine the fifty-year-old murder of a teenage girl, not so much for a real solution as a plausible fictional one. The intersection of reality and fiction is handled with remarkable clarity and ingenuity.

*** Gary Phillips: *Bad Night is Falling,* Berkley, $21.95. Los Angeles private eye Ivan Monk investigates murder and racial tensions in an inner-city housing project. Greater attractions than the serviceable plot are the involving characters and the author's unapologetically liberal social, political, and historical observations. Current Southern Californians will have no trouble identifying the black conservative talk-show host who inspired the character of Kenny Young. When the history of L.A. detective fiction is written, Phillips will be a subject alongside Chandler, Ellroy, Mosley, and the rest.

*** William Bernhardt: *The Midnight Before Christmas,* Ballantine, $14.95. One of the most consistently entertaining of the many current lawyer-novelists introduces lonely Oklahoma City attorney Megan McGee, who one Christmas Eve takes the case of a young wife asking protection from her estranged husband, a violence-prone, alcoholic ex-cop who wants to spend Christmas with his seven-year-old son and (says the distraught wife) kill him rather than be separated from him again. The crime plot is enthralling, especially one great twist midway, and the feel-good Yuletide message, if somewhat schematic in presentation, is still affecting.

*** John Straley: *The Angels Will Not Care,* Bantam, $22.95. Sitka, Alaska private-eye Cecil Younger takes a vaguely defined assignment to check on the activities of the ship's doctor on a luxurious Alaska cruise. The author's deft style evokes both natural beauty and human variety well. The characters—particularly Cecil, his mentally retarded roommate Teddy, and scientist girifriend Jane Marie—are memorably quirky, and the central plot is ingenious, original, and especially appropriate to the '90s.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Illustration Mark Evan Walker

BODY OF WORK

by Jeremiah Healy

1.

I looked from the client to her lawyer and said to him, "How about if we start with why you contacted me?"

Martin Fodor stroked the left side of his moustache with the pad of his right index finger. "As a private investigator, you mean?"

"That's what I mean."

Fodor resettled himself in the chair. Squat and barrel-chested when he'd stood from behind an impressive teak desk to shake hands a minute ago, the man had graying hair combed across a skull that had weathered fifty or so years better than its feathery covering.

Fodor said, "I knew a bit about the good work you did for Craig Abbot up in Beacon Harbor."

Abbot was a domestic relations (read: "divorce") attorney I'd helped with a homicide in the coastal town north of Boston. "And he told you I could keep my mouth shut."

Fodor permitted himself a small smile. "Craig's exact words were, 'John Cuddy will tell you the truth, whether you want to hear it or not.' "

©1998 by Jeremiah Healy

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"So what do I call you?" said Patricia Tsoris.

I turned to her, seated in the other chair in front of Fodor's desk. Tsoris was about five six, with light brown eyes and lustrous black hair flared like a fashion model with a wind machine behind her. Dressed in a plain gray suit and bright print scarf, she gave the impression of a woman in charge of the situation, except that the cuticles around the fingernails had been chewed on worse than a baby's teething ring.

"Your money, your choice," I said.

Like her lawyer, Tsoris barely smiled. "How much of my money are we talking about, John?"

Shamus Award winner Jeremiah Healy has created a P.I. who surely ranks as one of the modern classics. John Francis Cuddy first appeared in the novel *Blunt Darts,* published in 1984. Fifteen years later, he is still the author's most alluring character, the hero not only of more than a dozen subsequent novels but of many short stories such as the following. In May of 1999, Pocket Books will release *Spiral,* the new Cuddy novel. ¶

I tried not to picture the unpaid bills next to my checkbook at home. "That'll depend on two things."

"Namely?"

"What you want me to do, and whether I decide to do it."

Fodor cleared his throat. "Perhaps we're getting a bit ahead of ourselves. Why don't I provide some background, and then we all can make rational decisions."

I squared toward him in my chair. "Go ahead."

The lawyer opened a file on his desk, though he spoke without referring to the papers it contained. "Last week, a rather well-known local artist was killed at his home in Beacon Harbor. You knew of Elton Wix?"

"Not before I read about his murder."

Another clearing of the throat. "A little deeper background, then. Elton was African-American, one of the baby-boomer phenoms in the art world. A bit reclusive, but brilliant. His specialty was the collage." Fodor looked at me rather carefully. "You know what a 'collage' is?"

I thought about the one my wife Beth had made from photos of us, the year before she died. "Central character or theme, with fragments of image or words around it."

"Yes. Only Elton had a rather unique approach. He would use great symbolism in his work."

"What's unique about that?" I said.

Tsoris leaned into the conversation. "Elton was illiterate, John."

"Completely?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Functionally." Having gained my attention, she leaned back in her chair. "He grew up in the Caribbean—a peasant village, to hear him describe it. English was his first language, but he never learned to read and write. Symbols, on the other hand, fascinated him."

"Symbols of what?"

"The dollar sign for 'money,' or the *Ghostbusters* circle/slash for 'prohibited.' Elton loved symbols that stood for whole concepts."

I said, "How do you know so much about him?"

Tsoris nibbled on her left thumb. "For the last five years, I represented him."

"You're a lawyer, too?"

"No, no. I was his agent, for the artwork. Without me, Elton would still have been cutting and pasting for peanuts."

Tsoris's tone carried equal parts of arrogance and derogation. Fodor might have sensed something about how I was reacting. "In any case," he said, "Elton was just reaching some local pinnacles, and was poised—thanks to Patricia—for national, even international, acclaim."

"Why?"

A stroke over the moustache. "Why?"

"Yes. What was so special about the collages he did?"

"Nothing, really," said Tsoris. "It was all in the marketing, you see."

"Not yet."

Tsoris descended to my level. "Who has the money to dabble in art right now? The baby-boom generation. What appeals to them? Things that remind them of being young. Music, as in 'classic' rock, not 'oldies.' Hot cars, as in the return of the ragtop from Detroit and everywhere else. Et cetera, et cetera."

"Including," I said, "the elevation to 'great art' of the posters they had hanging under fishnets in their college dorm rooms."

Tsoris cocked her head, spoke a little more normally. "Exactly."

"For which they're now willing to pay a tad over two ninety-eight."

Now Tsoris gave me a coy smile, showing some teeth. "A tad."

"How much 'tad' are we talking about?" I said.

"Five to ten thousand."

Jesus. "Sounds like enough for some kind of motive."

Fodor said, "We hope not."

I looked at him. "What do you mean?"

He stared down at his file now. "Elton was found by his next-door neighbor in Beacon Harbor, though I understand 'next-door' to be a euphemism, since something like a quarter-mile separates the two houses. He'd been shot, relatively close-range according to the police."

"Sounds like means instead of motive."

Fodor glanced up at me, then at Tsoris. He said, "There were two finished collages in the house—"

"—More like a shack, John—"

"—and neither had been taken."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I thought about it. "Could there have been others that were?"

"No," said Tsoris. "He'd just been finishing those up."

"How do you know?"

She looked out the window. "I'd been there—a week *before* Elton died—discussing things with him."

"Things."

Fodor said, "I believe that what's material to the murder is that the police found Patricia's fingerprints at various places in Elton's hou—shack."

"That's something, but not much. How about the murder weapon?"

"Apparently it was a handgun Elton kept by his bed."

"Apparently?"

"Right caliber for the bullets . . . the wounds in his body, I'm told, but it's missing."

I nodded. "Why do I get the feeling that I haven't heard everything yet?"

Tsoris said, "Martin, the way you're telling it, we'll be here forever." To me, "I don't have an alibi for the time of Elton's death."

No surprise there. "Go on."

"As his agent, I'd visit him in that shack, the last time a week before the killing, like I said. The police claim that the lipstick found on a glass there matches the kind I started using *after* that last visit. It's called 'Black Panther.' Only supposedly this glass had been 'washed' and wiped of fingerprints. Now, I ask you, do I look the type who'd kill somebody and then forget to clean my own lipstick off a glass?"

No, at least to the cleaning part. "How many people knew about this new lipstick?"

"Everybody. Elton asked me about it at his opening."

"An art opening?"

"Yes, a gallery on Newbury that specializes in works like his."

Newbury Street is the chichi shopping drag in my neighborhood of Back Bay, but I've never spent much time—or money—in its galleries. "Name of the place?"

Tsoris gave me the coy smile again. " 'Collage,' what else?"

Easy enough to remember. "When was this opening?"

Tsoris attacked her left ring finger this time. "The night before he was killed."

"A minute ago, you said 'everybody' knew about your lipstick?"

"Elton was incredibly self-centered, even for an artist. One of his less endearing habits was that after asking you a question, he'd always boom out your answer, so that it would appear the information was actually coming from him."

"Got it."

"Well, three others were around in Collage that night. The gallery owner, Rex Noel. Elton's girlfriend, Lucie Son—that's S-O-N, some kind of Oriental."

Fodor winced.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Tsoris said, "And, of course, George Hetherington."

"Who's Hetherington?"

Fodor rustled some papers. "The neighbor who found Elton's body. I understand they didn't get along."

"They didn't get along, but this Hetherington shows up for the opening?"

"That's one of the things we'd like you to look into."

Tsoris raised her voice. "Not to mention the girlfriend, who calls herself a 'media' journalist but doesn't give a damn about art. Has her own column for the newspaper up there, though. 'Sonrise.' Get it?"

"S-O-N-R-I-S-E?"

"Exactly."

"And Mr. Noel?"

Tsoris looked to Fodor, seeming to seek guidance for the first time as she nibbled on her left pinky. Three fingers out of five, and another hand to go yet.

Facing me, he said, "Rex told Elton how much he'd gotten for one of the collages."

"So?"

"Well, a gallery sends the check to the artist's agent, who then deposits it, taking out the commission and forwarding the balance to the client."

When nobody said anything more, I thought about it. "And while Mr. Wix was illiterate, he wasn't . . . innumerate."

Tsoris looked out the window again. "I was in a cash bind. I would have made up the difference on his next piece."

"Did Mr. Wix confront you about it?"

"We . . . talked it over, the night of the opening. I'd smoothed things out with him."

"Do the police know about this?"

Fodor stroked both sides of his moustache. "So far as we're aware, not yet. But they have all the component parts, and if they ask for bank records and computer ledgers, well . . ."

I sat back. "So, you want to hire me before the other shoe drops."

"Yes," said Tsoris.

"One problem with that. For a homicide, I'd have to check in with the local police up there, and that'll make them wonder why you've hired a private investigator."

She looked at me. "Can't you just tell them it's confidential or something?"

"Yes. But all they have to do is ask around to everybody about retaining me, and eventually your name will stand out."

Fodor cleared his throat a third time. "Perhaps by then you'll have determined who really killed Elton."

I returned to him. "This amount of foresight's pretty unusual. Why not just wait for the other shoe to drop?"

"For an indictment, you mean?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes."

"I'll tell you why, John." Tsoris bared her teeth this time, but nothing like a smile. "People in the trade would understand me killing a client, particularly a self-centered bastard like Elton. They'd never accept me cheating one."

I thought I could see another reason why Fodor wanted to head this off at the pass and avoid a trial. "You told me who knew about the new lipstick. Who else knew about the gun?"

Tsoris blew out a breath. "Everybody, too. Elton used to brag about it all the time. 'Got dis gun beside my bed, y'know? I'se one tough motha, mon.' "

Fodor winced again. He had to keep Patricia Tsoris off the stand because a jury couldn't miss her attitude, blowing any hope of acquittal sky-high.

2.

I laid the roses diagonally across the grave, so that the blossoms pointed toward the last few letters of ELIZABETH MARY DEVLIN CUDDY on the stone.

Roses. Somebody must be feeling flush.

"Just picked up a new case, Beth. Killing of an artist, with his agent afraid she's a prime suspect."

Why?

"Apparently she kind of unilaterally increased her commission."

You don't like her, do you?

I looked down the cemetery's slope, toward the blue bay water at its foot. "Not especially."

How come?

"She's arrogant, and probably more than a little racist, and she cheated a client when she needed money."

But you still took her on.

"Yeah. Because I needed money, too."

A pause. *With one major difference, John.*

"I'd like to hear it."

You wouldn't cheat a client to get what you needed.

"Not so far, anyway. But she probably felt like that at some point, too."

Another pause. *Where was this artist killed?*

"Up in Beacon Harbor."

Well, at least the case will be picturesque.

I looked down at Beth, and then to her water view again. I didn't ask if "picturesque" helped.

"Hey, Cuddy. What're you doing back here?"

Detective Sergeant Joe Patrizzi sat behind his desk, feet up on the secretarial pull-tray, Beacon Harbor having bought its department desks long before computers and work-stations came into vogue. A

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nice view of a tree-dotted hillside through the window framed his narrow head and thin shoulders in the plaid shirt, tie knotted but pulled down. Patrizzi had told me in the past that he didn't like to be called "Sergeant," as it reminded him of his days in uniform, which he didn't ever intend to wear again.

"I wanted you to know I've been hired to look into a homicide up here."

"You gotta mean *the* homicide, right? Our own little Picasso?"

"That's the one."

Patrizzi pursed his lips. "We don't have anybody charged yet. Who're you representing on this?"

"Confidential, for now."

A shake of the narrow head. "So, what, you're just going to muck around some?"

"Not without letting you know first."

"Courtesy ain't dead." Patrizzi brought his feet down to the floor. "Okay, you let me know."

"I was wondering if I could maybe talk with you some, too."

"Talk with me, but not about who's paying your freight?"

"Yes."

Another shake. "I'll say this, Cuddy. You're so upfront, it's, like, disarming, you know?"

"Thanks."

"Take a seat."

I did. "What've you got?"

"What I've got is a state trooper attached to the D.A.'s office who couldn't find the ocean from the beach. But I went over this one with him, and I maybe can't blame the guy much."

"Why?"

"Well, we've got the crime-scene analysis, which tells us that our Mr. Wix was coming out of his kitchen into the living room when somebody greeted him from about ten feet away with six shots."

"Six."

"Yeah. Thirty-eight caliber. Five hit him, three having the good manners to lodge in his soft tissues where we could recover them. Ballistics won't bet the farm on it, but the markings suggest a Smith & Wesson barrel, and the decedent was known to keep a revolver around the house."

"Any reason for Wix to be afraid?"

"Hey, a black guy, living by himself out on the moor there?"

"I haven't been to the house yet."

"Yeah, well, it was me, I'd have an assault rifle under my pillow."

"Any history of racial things against him?"

"None. Beacon Harbor's pretty tolerant that way. Of course, it's also ninety-seven percent white, so it can kind of afford to be."

"I'm told a neighbor found the body."

"Yeah. One George Hetherington. Retired lawyer. If only they

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

all would decide to hang up the spikes."

"What was Hetherington doing in the victim's kitchen?"

"Body was found out back, on the water side of the house."

"This Wix owned waterfront property?"

"Given to him a few years ago by some 'patron of the arts.' I guess Hetherington's nose's been out of joint ever since, account of he thought him and the former owner had a deal that Hetherington could buy it himself."

I didn't want to lose the sequence here. "So you figure that Wix got shot in the house. Then what?"

"Blood trail tells us that he probably staggered out the back door onto his deck, and then down into his junk before kissing the ground and expiring."

Seemed like a lot of effort for a man hit five times and carrying three thirty-eights inside him. "What do you mean, his 'junk'?"

"Wix kept a lot of stuff in the backyard, I guess for his 'art' or whatever. Pieces of lumber, old bent metal, all kinds of junk, like I said. Probably another reason the neighbor wasn't too thrilled about him."

"You turned the house over to the relatives yet?"

"No, but only because there aren't any."

"So nobody's claimed the body, either."

"Girlfriend—Lucie Son, as in 'father and son'—wants to cremate him, but she's a reporter, thinks she knows all there is in this world."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning she's screaming that the medical examiner ought to have DNA tests done first."

"DNA?"

"Yeah. I told her, 'We don't have anything in the house to match up with a perp.' But she kept at it, so the M.E. drew some blood and tissue samples from Wix that we'll hold for elimination purposes, we ever arrest somebody."

"Any physical evidence beyond the slugs?"

"Yeah."

I waited, but Patrizzi just smiled.

"Any chance of me seeing the inside of the house?"

He pursed his lips again, kind of theatrically this time. "Sure. What else do I have to do?"

I followed Patrizzi's unmarked sedan in my car, so that he wouldn't have to bring me back to the station. We drove out of the town center and over a few miles of rolling country lanes before turning east onto a gravel driveway. It forked pretty quickly, Patrizzi taking the left prong as I looked back toward the right, which led to a nice, two-level Cape salt-box perched on a bluff overlooking the water.

The left fork ended at a tumble-down one-story house with mismatched shingles as siding and what appeared to be strips of green felt for a roof. Patrizzi killed his engine and got out, some

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dust swirling around his feet.

As I joined him, he said, "Pretty humble, huh?"

"So far."

Patrizzi had a key to the front door and led me inside. There was really just one large room containing a lot of ratty furniture, with a double bed in an alcove on the right and the doorway to a closet-sized bathroom on the left. Behind the living room was a double-wide doorway with no door leading toward a kitchen that, facing east, would probably have the nicest water view in the place.

"I don't see any artwork."

Patrizzi shrugged. "Agent—name of Patricia Tsoris, don't ask me to spell it without the file in front of me—said it was important to be sure they were protected, so she got permission to take them away."

"But their still being here kind of rules out a burglary gone sour."

"Oh, yeah. Plus what we found in the cabinet."

"Cabinet?"

"Kitchen. Come on."

We walked back into the kitchen. Through the window above the nineteen-fifties sink, I could see the junk in the yard and the ocean beyond.

Patrizzi pointed over the counter. "Cabinet." He opened the door to it. "See these wineglasses?"

There were a half-dozen or so, sitting upside down, as though to drain the water from the bulbs. "I see them."

"Well, turns out that two of them were still a little wet when we came on the scene, and there was a half bottle of white wine in the fridge."

I looked over to the refrigerator, about the same vintage as the sink and everything else, then back out to the living room. "Suggesting that maybe Wix was entertaining somebody."

"Right. Only we talked to everybody, and they all claim they weren't here."

"Any alibis?"

"Hey, Cuddy, you never see those outside the movies."

I thought about it. "Didn't you tell me the neighbor—Hetherington—was here?"

"Uh-unh. I said he's the one found the body. Hetherington was supposedly out jogging when the deed was done."

As casually as possible, I said, "You get anything off the glasses?"

Patrizzi grinned. "I knew it. The agent, Tsoris, am I right?"

May as well tough it out. "I don't get you."

"Fine." Still grinning. "We got no prints, but there was some lipstick on one of the wet glasses that we matched up with the kind Tsoris just started using."

I said, "But no gun."

"Hey, the way the ocean carved up the shore around here, we got over three miles of coastline in this town. I had the divers check for two hundred yards north and south out to fifty yards

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

east, but there's a limit, you know?"

He was right about that. I moved back toward the living room, stopping in the doorway. "Is this where Wix would have been?"

"Or close to it, the stains on the floor there and the spatter marks on the wall and jamb."

I looked down and up. A drab brown now, the way blood always dries.

"And after he's shot in the front, he turns," and I did, too, "and goes out the rear door here."

"Yeah," said Patrizzi, opening it for me. There was a planked deck maybe fifteen feet square. "Then he goes down these three steps to the grass, and gets maybe forty feet toward the water before he falls."

Fifteen feet of deck plus forty through the grass. Hell of a distance to run from a gun that, if it was his, he'd have to know was already empty.

"Cuddy?"

"Just thinking about something. Can you show me where he was when Hetherington found him?"

"Not exactly. Guy moved the body some."

"Moved it?"

"Rolled Wix over first, see what was wrong."

"That would have been pretty obvious."

"Not while the decedent was still lying on his stomach."

"Well, can you show me about where he was?"

"Yeah, but why not get it from the horse's mouth."

"I don't follow you."

Patrizzi gestured toward the neighboring saltbox. "I'm not seeing things, that's Hetherington himself, watching us with a pair of binoculars."

3.

"Originally, I purchased these for the birds."

George Hetherington waggled the binoculars. We were sitting on his own deck in a pair of wicker peacock chairs with fanny cushions, Joe Patrizzi having driven back to the station. Hetherington faced north toward the Wix house, me more easterly, "So you can enjoy the view while we talk."

In addition to being solicitous of his guest, Hetherington was about six one, in running shorts and a light vinyl warm-up jacket. His features were weathered and his short hair bleached almost white, like he spent the warmer weather in the sun up here and the colder weather in the sun down south. His legs had that defined but wizened look that comes from aging to roughly seventy while you train and pay heed to your diet at the same time.

I said, "You're a bird-watcher, then?"

"Oh yes. Fine hobby for the retired, so long as that's not all one does. But I keep fit by jogging every day between four and five P.M., with occasional tennis or golf at the club. That way I can enjoy the more

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pastoral aspects of living here without feeling guilty about them."

Somehow, Hetherington struck me as the sort of man who'd never felt guilty about anything. "Is that how you were able to see Mr. Wix's body?"

"Not exactly. I'd been out running—three point six miles, that afternoon. Upon my return, I began warming down on the deck here. Stretch the old muscles, that sort of thing. I certainly didn't hear any shots, but I noticed Wix had his back door open."

"Which was unusual?"

"Well, I certainly hadn't noticed it before. Though with all that flotsam and jetsam in his yard, I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised by it."

But he was. "What did you do after you noticed the door?"

"Well, I picked up the field glasses here, and I focused them on his door. I thought I could see a reddish stain there. The man fancied himself an artist, so I thought at first it might be just paint."

Fancied himself. "You didn't think much of Mr. Wix's work?"

"Work? Well, perhaps you could call it 'work.' But one certainly couldn't call it 'art.' Just pasted up any old thing around a photo of some celebrity's head. Not exactly Van Gogh, in my book."

"Yet you went to one of his openings."

"Yes. The man invited me as a goad, knowing I wouldn't attend. So I decided I would, just to goad him back."

"You two didn't get along, then."

"No. And not because of the obvious."

"The obvious?"

"Something racial. No, that property had been promised to me by its prior owner, you see, who then let it go to wrack and ruin. However, I held my tongue and stayed my hand. As an attorney, I knew an oral promise to convey real property wasn't enforceable—Statute of Frauds and all that—but I believed we had a gentleman's agreement. Then the prior owner became enamored of Wix's 'art' and decided to donate the place to him for a studio. Which Wix promptly turned into a junkyard."

"Not exactly in keeping with the . . . ambiance."

Hetherington fixed me with soulless eyes. "You think to mock me. The unfortunate fact is that Beacon Harbor had no land-use restrictions that applied directly to what Wix was doing. And, to be frank, I couldn't really see the junk from here. Just knowing it was there, however, was galling enough."

Galling enough to . . . "Mr. Hetherington, I wonder if you could show me how you found Mr. Wix."

"I just described it to you, didn't I?"

"Over in his yard, I mean."

Hetherington seemed to consider that. "Very well."

We hiked north across the high moor grass to the rear of Wix's deck.

Hetherington stopped. "I was about here, just ready to walk up the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

steps. I'd been keeping my eye on that door—swung open then, as I said before—and the reddish stain on it, noticing that the color was running down the wood, even pooling some on the planking of the deck. That's when I suspected foul play."

"Foul play."

"Precisely. So I turned and looked around, and that's when I saw his body."

"Can you show me?"

"Well, it was over here." Hetherington moved forty feet or so toward the water, past hunks of corroded metal and rusty artifacts such as an eggbeater, a toy train, and so on. He stopped again, this time at a piece of one-by-four lumber maybe three feet long. "Yes. Yes, that's the spot. Do you see the bloodstains?"

More dried brown, seeped into the wood. "And Mr. Wix was on top of that?"

"Yes. On his stomach, head toward the water. The wood was approximately halfway up his thighs, at the perpendicular."

"At the perpendicular."

"Yes. His legs were close together, as though he'd pitched forward with his arms out in front of his head, you see."

"To break his fall?"

"No, no. More as though—oh, this is rather silly for such a serious matter—but more . . ." Hetherington lifted his own arms above his head, elbows bent, fingertips on each hand just touching, like a ballerina.

"And that's how you found him?"

"Yes." Hetherington dropped his arms. "He looked so unnatural, I said, 'Are you hurt? Can you hear me?' And when he didn't respond, I took hold of his right elbow and rolled him over, onto his back. That's when I saw . . . the wounds. . . . I . . ." Hetherington looked east, as though the ocean could relieve something. "I practiced corporate law, never handled anything remotely criminal or . . . violent."

"After rolling Mr. Wix over, what did you do?"

"I ran back to my house and called the police, of course."

"You didn't go inside this place?"

"Certainly not. God knows what I might have found."

"Any idea who might have done this?"

"None. But Wix was one of those you see nowadays."

"One of those?"

"Blacks who have a chip on their shoulder, always assuming racism, in a foul-mouthed manner, before it's proved."

"And do you think it could have been proved here?"

A smile without any more soul than his eyes.

4.

"I'd like to see Lucie Son."

The woman behind the counter at the *Beacon Harbor Weekly* was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

about thirty, with blond hair and a kinder face than her profession should allow. "Let me take you back."

She opened a swinging gate in the counter, and I followed her past a clump of occupied computer terminals before we reached a couple with empty chairs.

My guide looked at a closed door in the opposite wall and cupped a hand to her ear. "Oh no."

"What's the matter?"

"Lucie's been sick ever since her . . . for a couple of weeks now."

Concentrating, I could pick up that sound of the dry heaves, muffled by the wall, but unmistakable. "Sorry to hear that."

"Just be understanding if she has to rush off on you."

"I will."

The muffled sound of flushing, too, and soon the door opened, a young woman with Asian features coming out. About five three, she wore no makeup, the wan cast of her face not covered by the color of her skin. The long black hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and Son wore hiking boots, plain jeans, and the kind of hippie blouse you used to see as the uniform in Harvard Square twenty-odd years ago. She walked unsteadily at first, then perked up a little.

"You okay, Lucie?" said the woman next to me.

"Better, Helen. Thanks."

"This gentleman wants to see you."

By the time Son reached me, Helen was almost back at the counter.

A gesture toward the next work station. "Pull up a chair."

I dragged the swivel chair over to face Son's, and we sat simultaneously.

"And you're . . . ?"

"John Cuddy." I showed her my identification holder.

"Private investigator." She handed it back to me. "What's this all about?"

"I'm looking into the death of Elton Wix."

The wan face hardened. "Who hired you?"

"I'm afraid that's confidential."

"Then I don't think we'll be talking much further."

"Would you reveal one confidential source as a condition of interviewing another?"

It was a moment before Son said, "Why do you want to talk with me?"

"I thought you might be able to tell me about Mr.Wix, maybe something that would help me find out who killed him."

Another moment. "You know that Elton and I were seeing each other."

"Yes."

"Okay." Son seemed to be organizing things in her head. "I met Elton about four months ago. He was just starting to 'hit' in the Boston art circles, which made him quite a celebrity up here. I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wangled an interview with him for my column."

"Wangled?"

"Elton didn't like to mix with people much. Oh, he'd do the artist turn for the gallery stuff, but he believed that too much socializing warped or blurred his 'vision for the work.' " A wan smile. "I'm afraid I never really understood how he did what he did. That may be why we got together."

"Because you didn't understand his art, you were no threat to it?"

"Something like that, I think." A distant look.

"The police said you wanted them to take DNA samples."

Son snapped back to me, "I want them to find his killer."

"Do you have anybody in mind?"

A little relenting. "His neighbor didn't like him. Real WASP-y guy; I think he resented a mixed-race couple next to him."

I stopped. "You were living with Mr. Wix?"

"Oh no. No, I have my own place. But I'd be over there enough, he could have thought that."

"The neighbor."

"Right."

"Did you know about Mr. Wix's gun?"

"Like, who didn't? Elton always bragged about that, kept it next to his bed. 'Kill me a Klanman, he come looking.' "

"There any reason one would?"

"Not that I know of. But then I don't think it was racial." I was feeling a little confused, but the woman was also feeling a little sick. "How do you mean?"

"Elton told me either his agent, Patricia Tsoris, had stolen from him, or this gallery owner, Rex Noel, had lied to him."

"And that made Mr. Wix mad?"

"Mad? No. No, it was more like . . ." Son seemed to be organizing things again. "Like he wanted to believe Rex, because that meant he'd caught Patricia, had power over her. Could kind of expose her, I guess."

Tsoris seemed afraid of roughly the same thing. "Did Mr. Wix say he was going to do anything along those lines?"

"Not in so many words. He was kind of mysterious about it, actually."

"Mysterious?"

"Yes. He just said, 'I'll get mine over this. Yes, I will.' "

"Anything else you can tell me?"

"No. I haven't been feeling too well, so I was working on a column at home the day he was killed."

Which wasn't exactly what I'd asked her.

5.

"And how can we help you, sir?"

"Rex Noel?"

"Yes." The man stepped from behind the cash register disguised as reception desk on the left-hand wall of Collage and folded his hands

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

below his belt in roughly a figleaf manner. The belt was distressed leather, holding up double-pleated pants under a loose-fitting polo shirt and above tasseled loafers. About five eight and a hundred forty including any coins in his pockets, Noel had sandy hair so short that the part must have been razored into his scalp.

"I'm interested in seeing pieces by Elton Wix."

A beaming smile. "Seeing we can arrange. Buying will be slightly more difficult."

"Why is that?"

"Well . . ." He glided toward the back wall, textured plaster with three framed and subtly spotlit pieces on it. Each frame bore a little blue sticky-dot on the lower left corner. "As everyone knows, an artist's body of work increases in value after his death."

"Because that's the end of the supply."

"*Exact-a-mont.* Once the news broke last week, so did the ceiling on the prices that Elton's pieces could command."

"And the blue dots . . . ?"

"Connote sold works. I'm sure more will come onto the market, but they'll simply cost the earth."

I looked at the three pieces on Noel's wall. Each had a news photo, laminated, of a well-known person. Donald Trump, Whitney Houston, Pope John Paul. Radiating around Trump were the silhouette of a tower; neon dice and poker chips; a high, blond wig; and dollar signs and cent symbols drawn large and small, thin and wide, in all the colors of the rainbow. Around Houston were microphones, CD cases, and musical symbols like G clefs and notes. Around the Pope were fragments of stained glass; a tall, gilded headdress and staff; and more dollar signs, some with crosses superimposed over them.

"Stunning, no?" said Noel.

"Different."

"Very intuitive of you. Anyone can patch together some shards of glossies from a magazine and call it a collage, but not many had Elton's exquisite sense of composition, unified by the perfect selection of themes and symbols to accentuate—no, to incomparably *cap*ture—the essence of the subject involved."

"How much did these 'essences' go for?"

"I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to say. But, if you'd like, I could take down your name and advise you of any new pieces that trickle through the pipeline."

"I was thinking more about a rumor that some old pieces trickled out of here for more than Mr. Wix might have thought."

Noel sniffed. "Police, is it?"

"Private investigator."

"Then I don't think I've anything further to add."

As he turned, I said, "Did Mr. Wix believe what you told him?"

Noel hesitated, then turned back to me. "What *I* told him?"

"About his agent maybe shorting him on his share."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A very visible swallowing. "I believe I need to ask you to leave now."

"And I'll go. But when I come back, the police may be with me."

"Look, pal," said Noel. "What's going on?"

Very little of Newbury Street in that last question. "I was hoping you could tell me."

"All I know is that somebody snuffed a rising star who might have gone *mega*. Elton's agent was savvy enough to place his work here, where my customer base is the perfect self-selecting audience, and I was glad to have the pieces, despite how bitchy Elton could be in person. But this gallery is a legitimate operation, and I don't want to be tarred by the same brush as some others who dealt with him. Is that clear enough?"

"For now. I appreciate your time. And the art lesson."

"Both wasted, I'm sure."

Maybe not. Wasted, that is.

Back in my office overlooking Boston Common, I tried to piece together my own collage. Not very artistic, granted, but sometimes just seeing everything in front of you at once can help.

I took out one of those pads of three-inch-square paper. From my notes, I lifted buzz words, and wrote one on each piece of paper. Last names like TSORIS, HETHERINGTON, SON, and NOEL. First names PATRICIA, GEORGE, LUCIE, and REX. Even things connected to them, like COMMISSION, BINOCULARS, COLUMN, GALLERY, and a dozen more. Then I drew a little stick figure of Elton Wix lying on his stomach in the yard, as George Hetherington had described him. Putting the stick figure in the center of my desk blotter, head pointing toward twelve o'clock, I laid the other pieces of paper around it. Not exactly "stunning," to borrow Rex Noel's phrase.

I began rotating the other pieces clockwise around the stick figure. Nothing. Then counterclockwise. Same. Then I began rotating the stick figure itself. A frustrating way to pass the time.

It wasn't until I had the head of the stick figure pointing to the piece of paper with JUNK on it that I remembered the three-foot section of one-by-four under Wix's legs. Why did Wix, who must have been in agony and fading fast, push himself onto his deck and forty feet into his yard to fall with a piece of wood under his thighs? Maybe coincidence, but I drew the lumber in at the right place, and suddenly the next rotation of the stick figure pointed to three o'clock and what I thought was the answer.

Helen-of-the-kind-face just let me in through the swinging gate this time. As I approached Lucie Son's computer terminal, she looked up at me.

Her eyes flickered, and I knew I was right.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Son looked back down at her screen. "I'm a little pressed just now, Mr. Cuddy."

"Putting the finishing touches on a column?"

She clacked two keys at once, which made the machine burp and bleep. Then she stared up at me. "Yes."

"The one called 'Sonrise.' "

"Only one I write."

"And you never really understood Mr. Wix's art."

Son tried to pull off baffled, fell a little short. "What are you talking about?"

I sat in the same empty chair I'd used on my earlier visit. "You heard Patricia Tsoris in Collage, telling Mr. Wix about her new lipstick."

"Everybody did. Whatever Elton wanted to know, he always repeated. Loud."

"But you don't wear makeup yourself, so no chance of any 'Black Panther' you applied to one of the wineglasses being connected to you."

Another flicker. "What?"

"And no problem with weapon, either. Mr. Wix provided nicely for that, telling everybody he had one, even where he kept it. All you had to do was get rid of the gun afterwards."

"Are you flipping out on me?"

"No, but I'm guessing that's what Mr. Wix did."

"What Elton did when?"

"When you told him you were pregnant."

Son dropped the staring contest.

I said, "He didn't want a baby, did he?"

Very quietly, she said, "I couldn't figure out what was wrong with me. I mean, I never get the flu, and besides, I didn't have any other symptoms except the . . . morning sickness, and then it hit me. And I just wanted to burst, I was so happy."

"But Mr. Wix wasn't."

Son's distant look. "I told him the night of the opening, after we got back to his place. I thought it would be perfect, you know? Kind of the crowning glory of his night, of his . . . life up till then. But he got enraged, telling me he wanted no part of a 'brat' now, now that he was about to . . . make it as an artist. He pushed me out the door, saying that when he blew the whistle on his agent, the publicity would shoot him to the stars."

"Was that when you got the idea?"

"The—oh, to shoot him, literally?" Son nodded abruptly. "Yes. I knew about Patricia cheating him, and the lipstick, and the gun. And that neighbor of his who always jogs the same time every day. So I stayed home from work, and I went over to Elton's, telling him, 'Let's just break it off cleanly, have some wine, and forget it.' So he said, 'Sure,' and went into the kitchen, and I heard the refrigerator door and I went over to the bed and he must have heard me because he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

came back into the living room without any glasses and I shot him and shot him and shot him. . . .

The run-on sentence ran out of gas. "Because Mr. Wix didn't want your baby."

"*Our* baby. But I did."

"And that's why you were so insistent with the police on the DNA testing."

A slow nod this time. "I don't understand much about art, but I knew Elton's collage pieces would get more and more valuable after he . . . was dead. The baby was entitled to that money, Mr. Cuddy, and I wanted to be sure I could prove Elton was the father."

"By matching the baby's DNA with the samples from Mr. Wix that the medical examiner would be holding."

"Yes." Her distant look again. "I watched Elton. After I shot him, I mean. I watched him turn and stagger to the back door, and then watched through the kitchen window as he went down the deck steps and into the yard. I didn't know what to do—I'd shot all the bullets in the gun. But then Elton finally stopped and fell."

Son focused on me once more. "You know, finally telling somebody all . . . this. It actually makes me feel better."

"Not for long, I'm afraid."

"What do you mean? You can't prove anything."

"Don't be too sure, Ms. Son."

"Why not?"

"A minute ago, you said you watched Mr. Wix fall."

Wary now. "Yes?"

"Down to his knees, like he was praying, maybe. Then forward, his arms above his head."

Warier. "So?"

"Mr. Wix knew you didn't understand his art."

Now just confused. "What?"

"The collages. The symbolism in them. He kneeled down out in the yard so he could fall onto a board, perpendicular to his body at the thighs. And pitching forward, Mr. Wix used his arms to approximate a circle as best he could, the whole symbol—"

"Symbol? Symbol of what?"

"Circle on top of a stick with a crosspiece halfway down the stick. The medical symbol for 'female.' "

"Female." Her voice sounded hollow.

"And pointing eastward."

The eyes did a little shrug. No comprehension.

I motioned at her computer. "The sun comes up in the east. 'Sonrise.'"

Her eyes closed.

Then, barely audibly, Lucie Son said, "Why couldn't Elton have cared as much about people as he did about his art?"

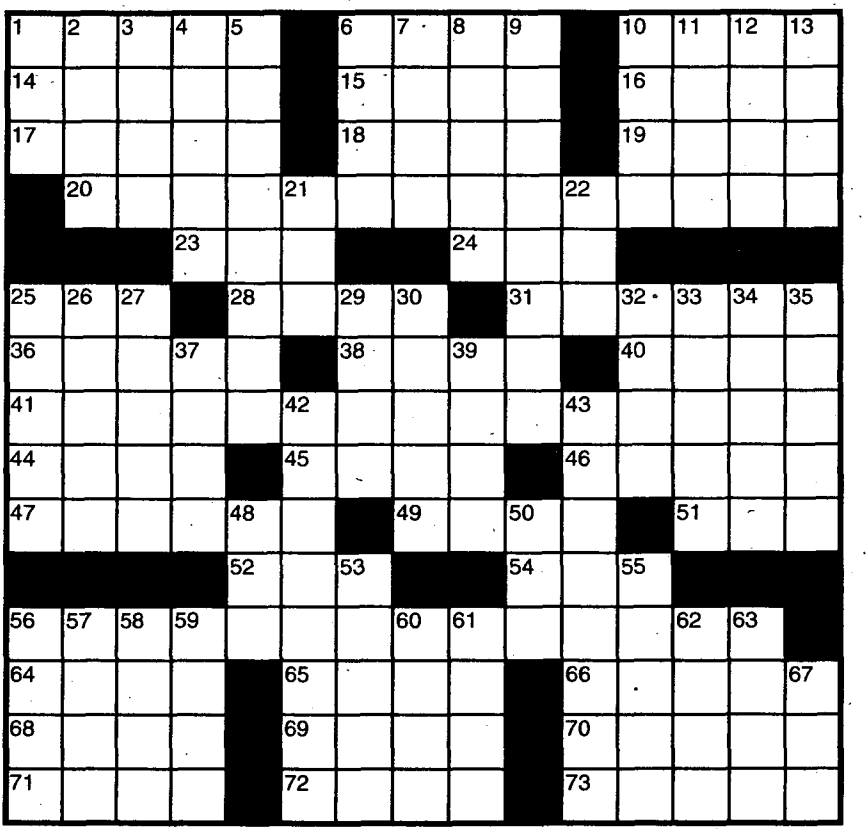
I had no answer for that one. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

More Gore

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 132

ACROSS

1. Agatha Christie and P.D. James, e.g.
6. Domesticated
10. Agent 007
14. White poplar
15. Irish Isle
16. Towards shelter
17. Stonecrop
18. Rage's partner
19. Citrus fruit
20. F.F.V. Blue? (William Hoffman)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

23. Compass reading
24. Salt
25. Vehicle
28. High-schooler
31. John Dickson Carr's pseudonym, _____ Dickson
36. Residence
38. and 48. down "____ thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ___?" *Twelfth Night,* II, iii, 124
40. ____ *La Douce,* Jack Lemmon film
41. Energy source? (Michael Lister)
44. First lady's namesakes
45. Challenge
46. Lariat
47. Phone button
49. Taro root
51. German article
52. ___ *Mis*
54. Help
56. Final remittance? (Elizabeth George)
64. Wings
65. Comfort
66. Nine, *comb. form*
68. Ashen
69. Follows young or old
70. Ranked
71. Dill
72. Go to ____, become unkempt
73. Shop

DOWN

1. Prosecutors
2. Often goes with 54 across
3. Middle, *pref.*
4. Escape notice
5. School term
6. Scarlett's home
7. *Was it* _ ___ *I Saw?* Sue Perry
8. *Déjeuner sur L'herbe* artist
9. Play interval
10. Globe
11. Medley
12. Verne Captain
13. Feat
21. Tiny
22. Bikini piece
25. *The Christie* _____, Carolyn Hart
26. Over
27. Propelled by boat
29. Ms. Buchanan, creator of Britt Montero
30. Maigret's "our"
32. Vex
33. Region around ancient Troy, "The _____"
34. Simon Brett's "Charles Paris" and others in his profession do this
35. *M*A*S*H** character
37. Lucy's husband
39. Let fall
42. Antonym for occupation
43. Some chickens
48. See 38 accross
50. Small amount
53. New York or New Jersey
55. Film star of *The 39 Steps,* Robert _____
56. Hemingway to friends
57. *The Hotel Detective* author ____ Russell
58. Popular lock
59. Confront
60. "Yet in my flesh shall _ ___ God," Job, xix, 28
61. Unpopular person
62. Aware of
63. Antelope's playmates
67. Summer drink

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Christmas Tree Killer

by Edward D. Hoch

This month we pass another milestone in the career of the modern master of the short story whodunit, Edward D. Hoch. "The Christmas Tree Killer" is the 100th Captain Leopold story to be penned by the prolific author. In it, Leopold, who's been brought out of retirement to work on the department's old, unsolved cases, cracks a serial-killer puzzle that dates from the 1960s. ¶

As soon as Leopold entered the office in his old squad room, Captain Fletcher came right to the point. "You haven't been happy in retirement, have you?"

"I suppose not," Leopold admitted. "I've done a couple of investigations for Molly, and I filled in when you were wounded, but I can't pretend it's the same. Most of the time I just sit around the house thinking about the old days." This was more than he'd ever admitted to Molly, but there were some things a wife could sense without being told.

"That's about what I thought," Fletcher said. "I've been thinking how well you did reopening that old Clemmins case a few months back. We could certainly use someone to wrap up our cold cases. There was a story on the news last week about a couple of cities that are doing just that, assigning detectives who are retired or on partial disability to dig into dead-end cases. Would it interest you?"

Leopold smiled. "Sure it would, but I don't see the city funding something like that."

"It doesn't have to be the city. Our murder rate's been pretty high for a city this size, and too many cases just get shuffled aside as unsolved. The department's received a small federal grant which I think we could use for this program if you're willing to give it a try."

"You're offering me a job?" Leopold asked. He could hardly believe it.

"It'll be mostly plowing through dusty old records from the fifties and early sixties, before you came back here from New York.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Nothing too glamorous about it, but I don't know anyone who could do a better job than you. Want to give it a try?"

"Sure, why not?"

He tried to sound casual later when he told Molly about the job. "It may be a good idea, something more cities should try."

"These would be unsolved homicides?" she asked while she put together a salad for dinner.

"Homicides and other violent crimes, anything my department handled. In practice, the statute of limitations would have run out on anything less than murder, so there'd be no point in reopening cases like armed robbery or rape."

"Sounds fine." She glanced at the thick folder he'd brought home with him. "Is that your first case?"

Leopold smiled. "In a manner of speaking. It happened in December of nineteen sixty-one, just before I came back home from New York and took the job as captain of Homicide. On the night of Friday, December fifteenth, three men driving red pickup trucks, each with a Christmas tree in the back, were shot and killed, all within a couple of hours. A fourth man was wounded but survived. Ballistics tests showed the bullets were all fired from the same thirty-eight-caliber revolver. I remember them still talking about the case when I arrived here, but there were no further killings and no one was ever arrested. The newspapers called the perpetrator the Christmas Tree Killer and gave the incidents a lot of space, but their stories didn't open up any new leads."

After dinner, while Molly did some work on a civil suit she was bringing to trial for her firm, Leopold pored over the old reports and records.

About the only thing he learned, hardly a surprise, was that most cops' handwriting was just as bad in 1961 as it was today. The detective who'd handled the case, Manny Lake, was long dead. Only one of the police officers, Frank Fox, had a name familiar to Leopold. That would be Sergeant Frank Fox now, the downtown desk sergeant. He would have been in his early twenties at the time.

Leopold decided to visit him in the morning.

Frank Fox was probably the first police officer Leopold met when he took over as the relatively young captain of the Homicide Division back in 1962. Fox himself was even younger, with an idealism that would soon wane. Now, seeing him as a desk sergeant at the end of a long career, Leopold felt a touch of sorrow for them both.

"How's it going, Frank?" he asked. "Ready for retirement yet?"

"I've been ready for ten years, Captain."

"You get a coffee break on this job? There's something I'd like to ask you about."

Fox nodded and motioned to a young sergeant. Then Leopold followed him into a small office with frosted glass in the door, set aside for coffee and smoking. After quickly outlining the nature of his new

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

duties, Leopold poured them each a cup of coffee and asked, "Do you remember the Christmas Tree Killer, back in sixty-one?"

Fox smiled at the question. "I guess some cops remember their first case the way guys remember their first woman. What do you want to know?"

"I've read through the files and all I find are the facts of the case, the four shootings, all within two hours. Three men dead and the other badly wounded. Nothing to connect them except that each drove a red pickup truck with a Christmas tree in the back."

"That's right. I was driving along Bayshore Boulevard around seven o'clock at night when I saw a young fellow flagging me down."

Leopold consulted his notes. "That would be Murph Simmons, who found the first body?"

"I don't know if you could say he found the body. More accurately, the body found him. The red pickup coasted right into the side of his car as he was turning into a parking lot. He got out, yelling at the driver, and found him dead behind the wheel. This fellow—Simmons, you say?—thought at first it was a heart attack. I was the one who noticed the bullet wound in his head. After that it was crazy. Three more reports came in within two hours."

"I guess a lot of people were out shopping for Christmas trees that night, and all driving red pickups."

"It wasn't too unusual for the fifteenth of December, especially on a Friday night. My shift was supposed to end at midnight but they kept everyone on duty, afraid there'd be more killings. I actually tailed a red pickup with a Christmas tree for a good half-hour, until he was safely home. Then I had to go out to the home of the victim who was still alive, Packard, and tell the man's wife that he'd been shot and rushed to the hospital. She was trimming their tree when I got there. He wouldn't even have needed one."

"And then nothing, after the fourth shooting?"

"Not a thing. The killings stopped as quickly as they'd started. We never had a clue. Of course, I wasn't directly involved in the investigation, but I spoke with the Homicide guys."

"Know anything about the victim who survived? Is he still alive?"

"His name was Packard and he later became a professional golfer. I think he's still around if he hasn't retired to Florida. Sonny Packard."

Leopold remembered the name now, though his eyes had passed over it in the case file. He'd been a minor sports celebrity in the city, a pro golfer who often played in tournaments. He never won big, and gradually drifted out of public notice, reappearing only when some charity dinner had chairs to be filled.

Golf was Sergeant Connie Trent's game and Leopold sought her out in the squad room. "Fletcher has me working on an old case, Connie," he told her. "Maybe you could help me find someone."

"I heard you were back," she said with a grin. "Now it's like old times. How can I help?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He told her briefly about the case, which would have happened about the time she was in the fifth grade. "One of the four victims, the only one to survive, was a local professional golfer named Sonny Packard. Name mean anything to you?"

Connie nodded. "He's the pro out at Greenleaf Country Club. I've seen him there, but I never heard about his being shot. I thought his biggest claim to fame was the time he tossed his clubs in a pond after missing an easy putt on a televised tournament."

"I remember that," Leopold said with a chuckle. "He was the third victim, the only one who lived. I think I'll have a talk with him."

"What can you find out after all these years?" she wondered.

"They're just trying to clear the books on some of these old dead-end cases. The key to this one is motive. The killer was after something, revenge or gain, but what?"

It was autumn and the weather had turned gloomy. The golf course seemed almost deserted but Leopold found Sonny Packard in the club's Pro Shop, looking over some catalogues. He was a gray-haired man about Leopold's age, with clear blue eyes that seemed to be staring at some distant green. "You're police?" he asked, after Leopold had introduced himself.

"On special assignment. We're trying to clear up the Christmas Tree Killer case from nineteen sixty-one."

"That was over thirty-five years ago!"

"I understand you were shot by the killer. I was hoping you might remember some details of it."

The golf pro shook his head. "I can barely remember it happening."

Leopold tried to refresh his memory. "Your statement at the time said you'd driven the truck to a Christmas tree lot on Saratoga Avenue and picked out a tree for your family. You had a wife and two children."

"Yeah. The wife and I got divorced twenty years ago, and the kids are both on second marriages. I wasn't home much, touring on the pro circuit. Maybe that had something to do with it."

"The report says you were shot once in the left side."

"Yeah, a flesh wound but it broke a rib. For a while I thought my golfing days were over, but it healed up pretty good. I guess I was lucky compared to the others."

"Could you tell me what you remember from that night?"

He shook his head. "Not very much. I was heading home with our tree about nine o'clock, and I decided we needed a few things from the liquor store. I pulled in and parked in front of the store. I'd opened the door and was just getting out when I felt this searing pain in my side. I didn't realize I was shot at first. There was some traffic noise and I never really heard the shot. I was clinging to the truck door, wondering what had happened to me, when someone came running up and saw the blood."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Man or woman?"

"What? Oh, a woman. No one I knew. She told me I was bleeding and called for help."

"Did you pass out?" Leopold asked.

"Not till the ambulance got me to the hospital. Then I think they gave me a shot of something."

"You saw no one? You had no idea why anyone would shoot you?"

"Oh, I had lots of ideas at the time, especially after I heard about the other three who died. I did lots of reading in those days, especially old mysteries—you know, Sherlock Holmes, Agatha Christie. I figured it was either a Blue Carbuncle or an ABC."

"Oh?"

"In the first a valuable jewel is hidden in a Christmas goose. I was thinking something valuable might have been hidden in one of those Christmas trees. It might have taken the killer four tries to find the right tree."

"An interesting idea," Leopold admitted. "But you saw no one searching your tree, did you?"

"No," he admitted. "Maybe my second idea was better. In the ABC case just one person is the real intended victim, and the similar killings take place only to hide this fact."

"You should have been a detective, Mr. Packard. Or a writer."

The golf pro shrugged. "Nothing ever came of it. The case just died."

Leopold took some photographs out of the case file he carried. "I believe these are pictures of the four trucks. Excuse the black-and-whites. Back in sixty-one the police department hadn't progressed to color photos of crime scenes yet."

"That's mine," he said, tapping the photo of a Chevy truck with a dented front grille. "It was a great little truck. I used to drive it around the country later, when I was touring with the pros."

"Was it a sixty-one model?"

"No, a sixty-two. I'd only had it three weeks when I was shot."

Leopold studied the pictures one at a time. "These two are Fords, and this is a Dodge. Not too similar, except that they were all red."

"And all had Christmas trees in the back."

"Yes, that too," Leopold agreed. He glanced over the individual reports. On December fifteenth, approaching the shortest day of the year, it would have been dark before five in the afternoon. The first victim, Arno Eberhardt, had coasted into the side of Murph Simmons's car at about 6:45, just minutes before Simmons hailed Officer Fox in his passing patrol car. By 7:30 the second shooting had been phoned in, from a waterfront area about two miles away. The victim, Charles Renzer, had been shot in the head after getting out of his truck in the parking lot of the Harbor View Cafe. In the picture, the top of his truck and the surrounding ground had a light coating of snow on them. Sonny Packard's shooting came about an hour later at the liquor store. His truck also had some snow on it, though not on

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the Christmas tree or the ground surrounding it. And the final victim, Seth Cooly, was found in his truck at 8:55, only a few blocks away. It had gone off the road after he was shot once through the window on the driver's side. A patrol car searching the area had stopped when the officers saw the red truck and the Christmas tree. The truck had a long radio antenna, but there was no snow visible in the picture.

"Four shootings within two hours and ten minutes," Leopold mused. "And then nothing."

Sonny Packard nodded. "Either he found what he was looking for or he ran out of red pickups carrying Christmas trees."

Leopold spent the rest of the day poring over the case file. He'd spoken to the cop who was first on the scene, and to the only person to survive one of the attacks. He wondered if the man who reported the first body was still living in the area. The phone book yielded one M. Simmons and he called the number. A woman with a young voice answered.

"Is this the number for Murph Simmons?" he asked.

"That's my father," she responded.

"Would it be possible to speak with him?"

"I'm afraid not. He's ill and confined to bed."

Leopold identified himself and explained about the old case. "I really think your father might help me if I could speak with him for a few minutes."

She hesitated, then said, "I'll ask him." There was silence for about three minutes, but just when Leopold was ready to give up she came back on the line. "When could you come out here?"

"Anytime," he answered. "Right now, if it's convenient."

"That would be good. In about twenty minutes? You have the address?"

"I'll be there."

It was a nice house in a residential part of the city, and there was evidence of an elaborate garden before the autumn frosts had moved in. The woman on the phone was older than she'd sounded, probably around forty. She introduced herself as Claire, without giving a last name, but she wore a wedding ring on the proper finger.

"I'll ask you to keep this brief," she said. "My father's health is not good."

The old man was sitting up in bed, not looking too bad to Leopold's eyes. His face was gaunt and lined with age, but he seemed alert. "So you're reopening that old case," he said by way of greeting.

"Reviewing it," Leopold corrected him. "We don't know yet if we'll be reopening it. I understand it was you who found the first victim."

The old man nodded. "Eberhardt, his name was. Shot in the head through his truck window, but I didn't know that at first. Thought he'd had a heart attack or something. The truck rolled down a little incline as I was entering a parking lot. Bumped right into me. When I saw he was either unconscious or dead I waved down a passing police car."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Did you ever hear anything about his family? Wife or children? They're mentioned in the police reports."

"Yes. I suppose most men buying a Christmas tree would have a family, wouldn't they? I became quite friendly with the second victim's family—the Renzers." He glanced at his daughter, as if it was her turn to speak.

She cleared her throat and said, "I'm Claire Renzer. I married the murdered man's son."

Leopold tried to hide his surprise. "But you must have been a child when it happened."

"Both of us were. We grew up more or less together. It was one of those things that happens sometimes. Dad felt sorry for them in their tragic loss. Our family tried to help, and Hank and I saw a great deal of each other."

"Is your mother-in-law still alive?" he asked.

"She died just last year. She never remarried."

"Do you live near here?"

"Not far. I've been coming over to look after Dad while he's ill."

"I'm feeling fine now, Claire," the old man told her. "When Hank comes you can go with him."

The front door opened as if on cue and a tall red-haired man entered. He would have been about Claire's age, and he was indeed Hank Renzer. "Pleased to meet you," he said, extending a hand to Leopold after Claire had introduced him.

"They're looking into the case again," Claire told him. "The Christmas Tree Killer."

"What can you find after all these years? Whoever did it is probably long dead."

"Thirty-six years isn't such a long time," Leopold pointed out. "There are plenty of people twice that age walking around these days."

"I'm one of them," Murph Simmons said from his bed. "More than twice that age."

As long as the Renzer son had appeared on the scene, Leopold asked him a question. "Did your mother ever say anything about a motive while she was alive? Your father may have had some enemy."

"No. She had no idea why he was killed. It was simply an insane act without a motive. Somehow, that night, a killer went prowling for red trucks and Christmas trees."

But even insane acts need a spark to set them off, Leopold knew.

At home that night, he brooded over the old case. He studied the file with its interviews and timetables, and even an old city map on which the late detective Manny Lake had traced the possible route of the Christmas Tree Killer across town. The first victim, Eberhardt, had been shot on the east side of the city at 6:45. Then the killer had driven two miles to the harbor area on the north shore of Long Island Sound, killing Renzer about forty-five minutes later. The line

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

on the map showed a direct route, though there was no way of knowing what route the killer might have followed. An hour passed before the shooting of Sonny Packard at 8:30, on the west side of the city. The last victim, Cooly, had been found off the road in his truck at 8:55, only a few blocks away. There'd been no eyewitnesses to any of the shootings, though that wasn't too surprising on a dark night. Certainly the killer'd had a vehicle of some sort. He couldn't have covered that ground on foot within the time frame. And the use of the same pistol ruled out multiple killers. Detectives had checked the sales slips for the Christmas trees and found they'd been purchased at three different tree lots. Only the third and fourth ones had been bought at the same place.

Leopold studied the photos again, noting the traces of snow on two of the cars. He reached for the telephone, calling Frank Fox's home number. His wife answered, and in a moment he heard Fox's voice on the line. "How's it going, Captain? Any leads on that old case yet?"

"I'm still trying, Frank. Tell me something. Can you remember if it was snowing the night of those killings?"

"I couldn't tell you that. It was a long time ago. It wouldn't have been snowing very hard or I think I'd have remembered it."

"Thanks anyway, Frank."

Leopold hung up and phoned the weather bureau at the airport. Someone checked the old records and told him there'd been no measurable snow at the airport on that date. However, with an onshore breeze blowing from the Sound, it could well have been snowing there.

He sighed and threw down his pencil in frustration just as Molly was passing the desk. "What's the trouble?" she asked.

"This cold-case business is impossible! After all those years hardly anyone's left alive and those that are don't really care to relive it. Reopening these cases is a waste of time."

"Are you going to tell Fletcher that?"

"Oh, I know he's trying to be helpful, trying to keep me occupied."

"What he's trying is to get the best mind in the department to work on some of these old cases. It's not for your benefit, it's for his."

"It's a dead end, Molly, just as dead as it was in nineteen sixty-one."

"What about motive?"

"There was none! They were random killings that started and then stopped."

"If they were all that random, why didn't he keep on with them?" she wanted to know.

"Because—Because red trucks stopped carrying Christmas trees."

"Be serious!"

He got up from the desk. "I'm going out for a walk. Maybe the fresh air will clear away the cobwebs."

The sidewalk was crunchy with an autumn's accumulation of dead leaves. Leopold, wearing only a sweater over his shirt, felt the chill of the evening breeze and wished he'd dressed in something warmer. Up

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ahead, just beyond the streetlight, he thought he saw a movement.

Then there was the familiar flash and crack of a gun, pointed straight at him, and Leopold went down.

He lay there for a full minute, waiting for a second shot or the approach of the unseen gunman. The sidewalk was cold against his cheek, but he dare not move. A retired cop had once told him he never walked his dog at night without taking his revolver along because he'd made too many enemies during his years on the force. Leopold had never realized how he felt until that moment.

He knew he hadn't been hit by the bullet because he'd felt it almost graze his cheek. Still, the would-be killer was out there somewhere. After a minute he took a chance and rolled his body quickly into the deeper shadows. There was no second shot. He got onto his knees and then stood up. Moving swiftly in the shadow of the trees, he reached the spot beyond the streetlight from which the shot had come.

There was nothing on the sidewalk, no clue, no ejected cartridge. But of course there wouldn't have been from a .38 revolver.

Did he really believe his reborn investigation had brought the Christmas Tree Killer back to life?

When he entered the house Molly took one look at him and asked, "What happened to your pants? You've got dirt on them."

"I fell down."

"Fell down?" She was immediately alarmed.

"I think someone shot at me and missed."

"Oh my God!"

"It's nothing. I'm all right."

"Nothing! You could have been killed!"

"But I wasn't."

"Do you think it's this old case you've been working on?"

"That comes to mind, of course, but there are any number of people I sent to prison."

"You'd better call Fletcher, have him send a squad car."

"I examined the scene. There's nothing for them to find."

"But he'll come back!"

"Probably not," Leopold said, trying to calm her. But upstairs he got out his 9mm Glock pistol and made sure it was loaded.

The following morning, in Fletcher's office, Leopold told him what had happened. "You should have phoned me," Fletcher said. "I could have had a car in front of your house the rest of the night."

"He didn't come back."

"But he might have. Molly would have felt better with someone there."

"I was there," Leopold reminded him. The previous night's event had left him in a bad mood.

"I know you can take care of yourself. I didn't mean that." He

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

looked away, collecting his thoughts, and then tried again. "Maybe this was a bad idea. I didn't expect anything like this."

"I've been shot at before, quite recently, if you'll remember."

Fletcher slid a pad across the desk. "Give me a list of everyone you've questioned about the case."

"I could count them on the fingers of one hand. Sergeant Frank Fox, the officer who called in the first shooting; Murph Simmons, who reported the shooting to Fox; Sonny Packard, the golf pro who was the third victim and only survivor; Claire, Simmons's daughter, who ended up marrying the second victim's son, Hank Renzer. Those five, no one else."

"Could one of them have been the Christmas Tree Killer?"

"I don't see how. Fox was an on-duty police officer the night it happened, Simmons was still being questioned by the police when the second murder occurred, Packard was the third victim, taken to the hospital before the fourth shooting, and Claire and Hank Renzer were small children when it happened. None of them could have done the killings."

"I was around then," Fletcher said. "I didn't become your assistant right away, but I was in the department."

"I don't think you did it, either," Leopold said with a smile. "Somehow it all hinges on motive. If we knew the motive we'd know everything." He thought about it, remembering what Sonny Packard had said about the Christmas goose. "Perhaps something hidden in a Christmas tree? The killings stopped because he found what he needed?"

"Could be," Fletcher said. Leopold had told him about Packard's two theories.

But Leopold reconsidered. "No, it couldn't be. In at least two of the killings the drivers were shot in the head through the left windows of their trucks. Far as we know, the killer never stopped to search the trees. That's certainly the case with the other two as well. The first victim's truck actually bumped into Simmons's car after he was shot, and the third victim—Sonny Packard—was still alive and conscious. There's no likelihood of anyone searching the Christmas trees without being seen."

"What was the other theory—the ABC one?"

"That only one of the four was the true victim, that the others were killed to hide that fact."

"Do you think it's a possibility?"

Leopold shook his head. "Do we really think, for instance, that Murph Simmons killed Charles Renzer so his daughter could marry the Renzer son a generation later and reap some unspecified financial gain?"

"No," Fletcher admitted. "But then where's the motive? A purely psycho killer would have kept on killing."

"Unless—" Leopold reached for the case file again, flipping through the pictures of the crime scenes. "Unless it was a motive that didn't really exist back in nineteen sixty-one."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

❖ ❖ ❖

Fletcher and Leopold parked the car around back and walked in. The young man behind the counter told them that Sonny Packard was out on the course giving a golf lesson.

"We'd better wait," Fletcher decided.

After about twenty minutes they saw him trudging across the fairway toward the clubhouse, carrying the bag of clubs over his shoulder. When he entered the shop and saw them he started to turn, as if about to make a run for it. But Fletcher was too fast, nailing him with a firm hand to the shoulder before he was out the door. "What is this?" he asked.

It was Leopold who spoke. "You were a better shot thirty-six years ago than you were last night, Simmons."

"What are you talking about?"

"Mr. Simmons," Fletcher said, "we want to question you about the so-called Christmas Tree Killings back in nineteen sixty-one. I must warn you that you have the right to remain silent and have a lawyer present, because anything you say may be used against you."

"Question me? I was one of the victims."

"Do you have an office where we can talk?"

"In here, but I can only give you a few minutes."

Once in the office, Leopold took over the conversation. He removed the photographs of the four trucks from his file and spread them on the desk. "Mr. Simmons, was it snowing the night you were shot?"

"I guess it was in some parts of the city. You can see there's snow on two of the trucks."

"Those would be trucks two and three, the ones driven by Charles Renzer and yourself."

"I guess so," he answered uneasily.

"Renzer was shot and killed in the parking lot of the Harbor View Club, down by the Sound. It was snowing there, because this photo shows snow on the truck and the ground around it. Your truck had snow on it too, but there's none on the ground, and there's no snow in the photo of the fourth truck, only a few blocks from yours. Conclusion: You picked up the snow somewhere down near the harbor area, but then drove out of it."

Sonny Packard shrugged. "I suppose so. I was driving around that night after I got the Christmas tree."

"There's no snow on your tree," Leopold pointed out. "You bought that later."

"I guess you're right. It's hard to remember exactly, so long ago. What are you getting at, anyway?"

"Mr. Packard," Leopold asked, "why did you buy a Christmas tree when your wife was already trimming one at home?"

"Yeah, that was a mix-up. I forgot."

"Why do you think you were shot in the side when the other three victims were shot in the head, the left temple, to be exact?" Fletcher asked.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sonny Packard shrugged. "Maybe his aim was off."

"Did you kill Arno Eberhardt, Charles Renzer, and Seth Cooly back in nineteen sixty-one?"

"Kill them! I didn't even know them!"

"Did you fire a shot at me last night?" Leopold asked.

"Are you guys crazy or something? I was nowhere near Hawthorne Street."

"How did you know I was shot at on Hawthorne Street?"

The color had drained from his face. "Do you mind telling me why you think I would kill three people I didn't even know?"

It was Leopold who answered. "I suppose it was a motive that didn't even exist back then, at least not by its present name. They call it road rage now. I remember you've lost your temper at golf tournaments on occasion. The photo of your truck, which you told me was just three weeks old, shows a dented grille. It happened that night, didn't it? Another red truck, with a Christmas tree in back, hit your grille and then drove away. You went after him with a pistol you carried in your truck. When you thought you'd found him, you shot and killed him through the window of his truck."

"And then?"

"And then, forty-five minutes later, down by the harbor, you came upon a second red truck with a Christmas tree. Part of the truck was covered with newly fallen snow so you couldn't be sure, but you thought it looked more like the vehicle that hit you. The driver had just gotten out and you shot him through the head. There would be one more before your rage calmed. You shot Seth Cooly through the window of his truck and left him there, off the road."

"I was in the hospital by that time," Packard argued.

"Exactly. You were never suspected for a moment because you seemed to be the third of four victims. But suppose you were really the last. Suppose Cooly was already dead but undiscovered in his truck. We're only talking about twenty-five minutes, and with those freezing temperatures the coroner couldn't have been certain about the time of death. Once he was dead, you bought a Christmas tree for yourself so you'd appear to be one of the victims, forgetting you already had one at home. I think you tried to shoot yourself in the arm, but you had to hold the gun as far away as possible to lessen the chance of powder burns. The bullet hit your side by mistake, but the wound helped bolster your innocence. You managed to hide the gun in your truck before help arrived."

Sonny Packard moistened his lips. "I want a lawyer."

"We'll let you call somebody."

"It was the last one, you know. That fellow Cooly. I remembered the long antenna on his truck. The others were a mistake, but he was the right one."

Fletcher took out his handcuffs. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Illustration by Jason Eckhardt

The Corpse on the Roof

by Gwen Davenport

"The house next door has been sold," Martin Loomis told his wife as he came home from a short walk down the street and back.

"I'm not surprised," she said. "It's such a nice neighborhood, so quiet and peaceful but convenient to everything. I knew that house would be snapped up." The house in question was number Thirty-six Allen Street; the Loomis number was Thirty-nine.

"I wonder who our new neighbors will be," Martin remarked. "It would be nice if they play mah-jongg." He lowered himself carefully into a green metal chair on his front porch, from where, because his house was at the end of a dead-end street, he had a good view of the neighborhood activity, such as it was; it amounted to very little, and that was its charm.

Martin Loomis moved about cautiously with good reason: He had recently suffered a mild heart attack although he was only sixty-two. His doctor had advised him to take early retirement from his job as a bank security guard, and to avoid any stress or strenuous activity. He was enjoying the subsequent life of leisure, though it was hard on Elsie, who now had to mow the patch of lawn, carry out the trash, remove window screens and put up storm sashes, a task she had just

© 1998 by Gwen Davenport

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

finished in time for the October shift of time from Daylight back to Standard.

Martin did not like these changes in what he regarded as God's time. "They do it end of October on purpose," he observed, "so it'll be dark early on Halloween and the kids can get run over trick-or-treating."

"That shouldn't bother you," said his wife. "They don't come down Allen Street anyway, they go where they know they'll get better pickings."

Martin said, "I hope our new neighbors don't put out trick or treats."

Although Gwen Davenport has not previously published with *EQMM*, her work will be familiar to movie buffs, for in the late forties she wrote a novel, *Mr. Belvedere*, on which the movies *Mr. Belvedere Goes to College* and *Mr. Belvedere Rings the Bell* were based. (Both movies starred Clifton Webb.) Ms. Davenport's welcome debut for *EQMM* explores a true menace of the holiday season.

The new neighbor moved in immediately, even before Halloween, and proved to be a single gentleman of about Martin's age, of medium height, like Martin, and—also like him—going bald. But he was of an entirely different build, being stocky and strong. Martin saw him carrying crates and trunks into the house and garage all by himself from the pickup truck that was evidently his vehicle of choice. It remained parked in the driveway. Martin told Elsie that he didn't like to see that; this was not a fashionable neighborhood, but it was respectable; a pickup truck in the driveway lowered the tone of the street.

After the truck had been in front of the house for three days, Martin went over to speak to the new neighbor, who was doing something under a basswood tree in the front yard. Martin introduced himself.

The man's name was Joe Purdom. He was a widower who worked at the main branch of the post office. He not only did not play mah-jongg, he had never heard of it. "Anything like Chinese checkers?" he asked. He was standing on a ladder under the basswood tree, in the process of hanging from a branch halfway up a strange figure that looked like a skeleton. "Just in time for Halloween," he explained. "It's my hobby."

Martin went home and told Elsie, "Man's crazy. Come dark, nobody'd know the thing was hanging there, even if anyone ever came down this way."

But come dark, a floodlight was turned on in the Purdom yard that shone directly on the skeleton (whose bones had been treated with reflective paint) and directly into the windows of Martin Loomis's bedroom. Even with the shades drawn there were oblongs of bright light on the wall opposite the Loomis marriage bed. The floodlight stayed on all night.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Now don't get upset about it," Elsie told Martin, "it's only one more night to Halloween, and then it'll be all over. Besides, wait'll he sees his electric bill."

Elsie was right. On the day after Halloween the skeleton and the floodlight were gone. But a few days into November signs of activity reappeared in front of Purdom's house. All day on weekends, early mornings and afternoons on weekdays, Martin watched from his front window as Joe Purdom came and went from pickup truck to house to yard, and all sorts of figures and objects were accumulated. By Thanksgiving there were four life-size turkeys over the front door on the roof of the Purdom porch, sheaves of cornstalks lined the driveway, there was a six-foot-tall Pilgrim standing on a platform beside the figure of a woman sitting in a pillory with a bright red capital letter A painted on her chest. Under the basswood tree there lurked an Indian in a feathered headdress brandishing a bow and arrow. Floodlights on the porch roof and in every corner of the yard illuminated the scene by night and made the Loomis bedroom as bright as daylight.

Martin's blood pressure rose alarmingly; he feared another heart attack. Christmas was ahead, and the activity at the Purdom house was increasing. In mid-month Joe Purdom quit his job to devote full-time to his hobby, which was pursued indoors and out. The pickup truck was moved into the street and parked in front of number Thirty-nine.

Martin sent Elsie to call on their immediate neighbors to get signatures on a petition asking for action at City Hall. None was taken because Purdom was not disturbing the peace or committing a nuisance.

Long before Christmas— in fact, immediately after the turkeys and Pilgrims were gone— there appeared on Purdom's porch roof a full-grown Santa in a sleigh pulled by nine reindeer (one red-nosed), and this was only the center of attraction. Twinkling lights outlined the whole house and hung from every tree, along with toys, stockings, gnomes, and icicles. A crèche was erected featuring the Holy Family, wise men, beasts, angels, and fowls. For the first time sound was added to light, and all night a loudspeaker blared forth recordings of "Rudolph, the Red-nosed Reindeer," "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus," and "Jingle Bell Rock." The sky over Allen Street was lit up and the night air was filled with the sound of music.

So the curious were drawn to investigate. Cars full of them crawled along the street to stop in front of number Thirty-six and admire. Word spread. Every night the numbers of vehicles increased. Grandparents and kiddies got out to walk along Purdom's driveway for a closer look. The drivers tried to turn around in front of number Thirty-nine and got hopelessly stalled. Headlights now joined the floodlights glaring into the Loomis house. Honking automobile horns tried to outshout the canned music coming from the loudspeaker. Elsie Loomis had a nervous breakdown. She and Martin went to live

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in a small bedroom at the back of the house.

"We'll have to move," Martin decided, "it's a matter of life and death." So he sought out a real-estate agent, who quoted a ridiculously low asking price for number Thirty-nine because "Property values have gone way down on Allen Street, and indeed in the whole neighborhood." The Loomises could not possibly afford to move.

A new protest to City Hall, signed by ten residents of Allen Street, was greeted with indignation: Joe Purdom had won a City Hall-sponsored competition for the best Christmas display in the city; number Thirty-six was a big tourist attraction. The ten complainers of Allen Street were child-hating Scrooges.

Over the next couple of years the Loomises watched as the displays at number Thirty-six became ever more elaborate. There was no slack season. Christmas lasted from Thanksgiving until after Twelfth Night, after which comic Valentines began to appear, bleeding hearts pierced with Cupid's arrows hung from the basswood tree. Then came Easter, with a human-size white rabbit called Harvey eating big carrots, a hutch full of live dyed bunnies and varicolored eggs, chickens nesting in the basswood tree. Mother's Day was followed by the Fourth of July, then came Labor Day and Columbus Day. Columbus stood in the yard of number Thirty-six on the prow of the *Nina, Pinta,* or *Santa Maria*—no telling which—with a wild-looking Carib native staring out from under the basswood tree with a knife between his teeth.

And so another Halloween rolled around. All summer the Loomises had kept to their backyard and small garden, where Elsie grew tomatoes and pole beans while Martin sat and watched them grow. Martin had not seen Joe Purdom for a year or more, during which time he had lost a lot of weight and on the Fourth of July had suffered a spasm of the heart when a cannon was fired in front of number Thirty-six as the climax to Aretha Franklin's singing of the national anthem.

On a chilly morning in mid October, Martin ventured out for a short walk, his doctor having recommended mild exercise. He was warmly dressed (keeping the heart warm was important) and was wearing earmuffs, a woolen scarf, and home-knit mittens. It being a weekday and children in school, the street was empty of spectators.

This Halloween Purdom had outdone himself. Across the entire property, from the street to the backyard, had been stretched yellow police tape on which was printed "DANGER—Cross Line at Risk of Your Life." Behind it was a graveyard containing a dozen graves, from some of which ghosts were emerging. The tombstones bore clever inscriptions like "Here Lies Dracula. Died of Thirst." "Mrs. Dracula. Fell in Love at First Bite." "Here Lies the body of Willie Howe. He Always Lied, He's lying Now." Under the basswood tree a mechanized Phantom of the Opera, wearing a long black cloak, was seated at an organ. On the roof of the house the black silhouette of a witch with a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

black cat on her shoulder rode a broomstick against a blood-red moon. Ghoulish figures lurked behind every shrub. The driveway was lined with jack-o'-lanterns, each containing an electric light. No music accompanied this display, but at about five-minute intervals a bloodcurdling howl sounded overhead, as if coming from a soul in torment.

As he took in all this, Martin felt his heartbeat accelerate alarmingly. He was turning away when he saw Joe Purdom come along the driveway between the jack-o'-lanterns.

"Say, Loomis," Joe greeted him, "can you lend me a hand for a minute?"

Martin lifted the earmuffs. "Are you talking to me?" he asked coldly.

"Yeah. I wonder if you'd help me with something that needs two pair of hands?"

Martin was taken aback. The nerve of the man! Asking *him* for help, him whose health he had ruined and whose property he had rendered virtually worthless.

Then natural curiosity overcame righteous indignation. "I'd be happy to help you tear down this whole mess of junk and cart it away to the dump," he said.

"Nothing as big as that," said Joe Purdom. "Come in and I'll show it to you, it won't take but a few minutes." He led the way across the front porch to the door, and Martin followed, drawn by an overwhelming desire to see backstage, as it were.

Inside number Thirty-six Purdom switched on a light in the narrow entranceway and Martin saw a sort of tunnel between walls of crates, barrels, and boxes. In what was the former living room, on the left, he made out the pillory platform crowded with Pilgrims, Indians, Harvey the rabbit, and other figures. On the walls from floor to ceiling hung shelves holding jack-o'-lanterns, bows and arrows, bleeding hearts, and strings of electric lights. In the room to the right, properly the dining room, he recognized the cannon from the Fourth of July.

Purdom led the way up the narrow staircase and into what was presumably his bedroom at the front of the house. It contained his personal effects and twin beds, in one of which he obviously slept. On the other lay effigies of Whistler's mother and Mother Teresa (Mother's Day). The windows of this room opened onto the porch roof, where at Christmastime Santa sat in the sleigh.

Purdom opened the window and Martin saw the whole Halloween production from behind, stretching out beneath him as if, like Alice, he had stepped through the looking glass. The bloodcurdling howl sounded.

"There's something missing, you see," said Joe Purdom. "There's no corpse. It's not complete without a corpse."

For a horrible moment it occurred to Martin that Purdom was planning to kill him in order to have a corpse. His heart leaped and banged with fear. "Why are you doing this?" he cried. "What's in it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for you? You're not advertising or selling anything, and it must cost a fortune in electric bills!"

Purdom had climbed through the window onto the roof, and Martin failed to hear the reply. He leaned out and pulled off the earmuffs. "What did you say?" he asked. The earmuffs curled themselves into a ball and rolled down the roof to the gutter.

"I told you, it's my hobby. I want to make the kiddies happy. I love kids."

"Do you have any of your own?" Martin asked.

"No, that's why I love them. And for them to really enjoy Halloween there ought to be a corpse. Now, you see, there's nothing on this roof; it's just the place for a corpse. It will be hanging by a noose from a gibbet, and that's where I need you to help. The thing's too heavy, I need you to hold it up while I bolt it to the side of the house. As you see, the roof has a slight pitch to it, we have to be careful of our footing."

Purdom showed Martin the triangular wooden structure. It was made of three four-by-fours, two at right angles and a third that braced them. A pulley hung from the end of the top piece. The corpse was a dummy stuffed with straw, and there was a length of rope ending in an ingenious noose that would slip easily over the head of the corpse and tighten with the weight of the body as it fell. The rope was to be secured on a cleat that was fastened to the inside of the window frame. Purdom explained that he had learned the knot when he served a hitch in the Navy; it was one of many that he had found useful in all sorts of ways. He had been sorry when the use of string was forbidden in the post office in favor of gummed tape. He expected Martin to climb out on the roof and help him to erect the gibbet.

In fear for his life, Martin did as he was told, and eventually the structure was in place at the corner of the roof. Martin climbed back through the window, trembling, followed by Purdom, who said, "And now to hang the corpse. We need for the noose to be the right distance from the ground—from the roof, I should say. Let's measure his height."

The straw dummy was too limp and floppy to stand erect and be measured.

"Tell you what," Purdom said, "it's exactly my height, it's wearing my clothes. I'll stand there myself." He took the rope with the noose and crawled back out through the window. He threaded the rope through the pulley, gave the end to Martin, and positioned himself under the gibbet. "Why, you're the same height yourself, aren't you?" he went on. "Quite a coincidence." He placed the noose loosely around his neck, so it rested on his shoulders. "Now draw the rope up gently and mark where we want it to come to fasten it to the cleat," he ordered.

Martin stood by the open window holding the end of the rope. He felt a burning sensation in his chest.

"Well, get on with it," Purdom said impatiently. "It's only a couple of weeks to Halloween. The corpse will just *make* the holiday

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

something special for the kids."

"You aren't making the day special," said Martin, breathing heavily, "you're ruining it. There's nothing special about holidays anymore." He was not an articulate man, and he found it difficult to put his beliefs and feelings into words. Allhallows Eve, he thought, All Saints' Day, it comes just once a year, one day, not a whole month. Rather than doing anything special for the kiddies, Purdom was somehow depriving them of something special.

The intermittent howl went off.

"Just because *you* don't happen to like it," said Joe Purdom, "you want to spoil it for other people. You're very selfish."

Martin thought of Christmas, the humble birth in the manger on that holy night two thousand years ago, and he thought of Joe Purdom's vulgar display, a travesty of Christmas, with its dreadful secular music, starting months before December twenty-fifth. By Christmas Eve everybody was sick and tired of the whole thing and children had seen dozens of Santa Clauses in shops, and on street corners and rooftops.

Long-pent-up grievances burst forth. "It's *you* who're the selfish one!" Martin cried. "You spoil everything for the children, thinking only of yourself, showing off, drawing crowds, getting your picture in the paper, trivializing sacred holidays—Independence Day—Thanksgiving, the day for giving thanks—" He paused. His breath was coming in shallow gasps.

The bloodcurdling howl sounded.

"You're not only selfish," he heard Purdom say, "you're envious."

Martin's thick mittens were hampering him. In order better to grasp the rope, he tore off the right mitten. It fell to the floor alongside the dummy. Using every ounce of strength he did not know he possessed, he pulled on the rope. He saw Joe Purdom jerked up off the roof as the noose was drawn tight. He secured the end of the rope around the cleat.

The journey back to number Thirty-nine was a slow one. The pain in Martin's chest was now excruciating and ceaseless. He was vaguely aware that he had been driven to commit a crime, but no one had seen him enter Purdom's property half an hour earlier, and no one now saw him leave. He could not be connected with what had just happened at number Thirty-six Allen Street. He was unaware that he had left behind the earmuffs Elsie had embroidered with little gold bells and one of her home-knit mittens. He had a sensation of having narrowly escaped the scene rather than having fled from it. He stumbled up his front steps and fell on the doormat. Elsie found him there as she went out to see why he had not come home. His face was a dreadful shade of blue; it looked like a huge bruise.

The sound of the Halloween howl came from across the street, but Martin Loomis did not hear it. Nor did he see the corpse on his neighbor's roof.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FAMILY GATHERING

by Janet LaPierre

Mountain Home, the Duncan family's hunting lodge and vacation retreat, seemed to grow right out of the rocky ground it stood on, its grayish, weathered-cedar bulk as natural to the landscape as the Douglas firs and lodgepole and sugar pines that surrounded it. Veiled now by a scrim of large snowflakes drifting silently down, height diminished by midwinter snowpack, it might have been closed up for the season or even abandoned except for plumes of smoke from a massive stone chimney on its south side and a smaller metal one on the north.

Becky Duncan pulled off her knitted wool cap, shook her long red hair loose, and cast an assessing look at the steps she'd scraped clear earlier, the lowest of the flight sheltered by the false outer wall. Still okay, she decided, and banged first one foot, then the other against the bottom step to dislodge caked snow from her boots before running up the tunnel-like staircase. At the top she kicked off the boots and set them beside the winter door.

Her wool-stockinged feet and her wool pants were dry; but the shoulders of her jacket had been dampened by the wet flakes. She trotted down from the half-landing of the inner staircase and moved through the foyer and the big kitchen, warm from its wood-burning stove, into the utility room, where she hung the jacket neatly on a wooden rack. In times of uncertainty, doing things properly without being told was for Becky a gesture of submission and hope, like genuflecting in church: I'm a good girl, God, now please be good to me.

The kitchen was full of the comforting smell of freshly baked bread, from three loaves cooling on wire racks. There was another

A former nominee for both the Anthony and Macavity Awards, Janet LaPierre is the author of a series of six mystery novels set in the fictitious small town of Port Silva, California. The setting for the books was inspired by the austere beauty of the foggy California north coast. Readers in search of the most recent novel in the Port Silva series, *Baby Mine,* will find it in trade paperback from Perseverance Press (1999). ‡

©1998 by Janet LaPierre

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

aroma, too, from the deep-well pot on the stove; but the stew simmering there was a traditional family recipe made with lamb, not beef, and there was a sweetish edge to its smell, and its taste, that Becky didn't care for. Maybe it would stick, she thought, and then guiltily paused to lift the lid and prod the stuff thoroughly with a long-handled wooden spoon. Nope, not yet.

Becky slid the pocket door open and stepped into the central room, which was something like fifty feet long by thirty feet wide, two stories high, and chilly even with the furnace on. "I'm back, Great-gran," she called to the tiny figure in the high-backed rocker beside the fireplace.

"Hello, dear. Come and get warm by the fire."

Elizabeth Duncan at eighty-five years of age was always cold. She wore an ankle-length wool skirt with, Becky knew, long underwear beneath. Her blouse was also wool, as was the crocheted shawl pulled close around her shoulders. Although the old woman's face wore a netting of tiny wrinkles, her wildly curling white hair and the black patch over her left eye gave her a piratical look. Becky loved her more than anyone in the world except maybe her mother.

"Do you want me to get you another lamp?" Becky asked. The glass doors that gave summer access to the deck, and all the room's lower windows as well, were covered with snow shutters; on a gray winter afternoon the windows under the eaves didn't let in much light.

"Thank you, no," said Elizabeth, her fingers moving steadily with wool and crochet hook. "I do this mostly by feel. Is it weathery out there?"

"It's nice. Cold but not windy, snowing just like feathers." Becky dropped to her favorite seat, a round, squishy leather hassock, and reached her hands out to the fire. Softly lit by kerosene lamps, the flagstoned hearth area with its couches and wing chairs was a cozy island. The upper reaches of the surrounding room were shadowed, and if you didn't look up, you wouldn't even be aware of all those dead animal heads on the walls: a moose and a deer and an antelope and a sheep, or maybe it was a goat, and even a mountain lion. Looking at them always made her sad.

Elizabeth caught the slight duck of her twelve-year-old great-granddaughter's head, and recognized the feeling. She herself had always disliked the overhead animal population, every one of which had been shot by a Duncan: her husband Sandy, her son James, her grandson Alex. Alex was presently somewhere in the wilds of the northern California mountains trying to acquire another display piece—whatever large four-legged creature might be legal game in February, or even just available.

"You didn't want to go hunting with your father?" she asked.

"No, ma'am! It really pissed . . . it made Daddy mad, because he says I have the hand-eye whatever to be a really good shot. But I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

don't care," she added with a defiant toss of the red hair. "I don't like killing things."

"Killing for display is offensive, I agree. But I don't object to killing to eat . . . or in self-defense," Elizabeth added, eyeing the brown, hairy shape spread out on the flagstones and remembering almost with disbelief how it had come to be a rug instead of a bear. "The fellow there in front of you is a good example. I met him by accident, and I tried to get out of his way and leave him alone, but he came after me. So I killed him."

"You did?" Becky pulled her feet up onto the hassock and stared at the splayed claws and snarling, toothy face. "Wow," she said softly, and sent a measuring glance toward the glass-fronted gun cabinet that stood against the opposite wall. "Most of those guns are bigger than you are."

"I wasn't always a bent, arthritic crone," said Elizabeth. She noted the girl's easy posture with a mixture of relief and futile, helpless anger. On her arrival here three days earlier, Becky had carried herself stiffly, as if she were the one with creaky old bones. "I suppose your father punished you for refusing his request."

"Spare the rod—or the strap—and spoil the kid, is, like, his favorite quote," said Becky with a shrug. "No big deal. And I got what I wanted, to come stay with you. I really love being here when it's just us."

"I do, too." Tempted to let it go at that, Elizabeth reminded herself that she had always been as honest as decency permitted with this child, who from her babyhood had been not only the light but also the warmth in the life of a lonely, selfish old woman. "I'm glad we had this chance, because there probably won't be many more."

Becky jerked bolt upright, feet on the floor. "Mom says Daddy's just blowing off steam when he yells about you! She says he wouldn't ever actually hurt you!"

"That's not what I was thinking," said Elizabeth, a literal truth that shifted its shape in her mind as she spoke. "But you must realize that I'm very, very old, and very tired." And useless. She looked at the material in her lap, then leaned to pull a fresh ball of yarn from a basket beside her chair. "Here, dear. Would you tie these together for me? Just a very small knot.

"And how is your brother these days?" she asked as Becky's quick fingers made the knot. "I haven't seen Jimmy in more than a year." Jimmy Duncan, who would no doubt have loved to go hunting, was instead serving a stint as a boarding student at his private school, to remain there until he got caught up on neglected work.

"He was sort of okay, practically a real human being, for a while," said Becky. "But now that Daddy's back home, Jimmy is just his old rotten self. And he's really growing; he's lots bigger than me."

"Ah, a true Duncan male. They can get quite large; your great-grandfather was six feet five."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What about the Duncan females?" Becky demanded.

"There haven't been any, dear. Your mother's production of twins broke a single-son pattern of at least a hundred years." Becky handed back the multicolored mass of wool; Elizabeth tipped her head to bring her single eye to bear on the half-finished afghan, then went to work again with the crochet hook. "You probably shouldn't count on getting tall, Becky. I think you may have inherited my small frame along with my red hair."

"Yeah," said Becky glumly. "Jimmy says that by next year he'll be able to pick me up and throw me."

Yes, a true Duncan male. "Boys enjoy saying things like that," said Elizabeth grimly. She stilled her hands in her lap and lifted her head to listen. "Is that a car? I'm hoping the others will get here before dark."

Becky listened, too, and then got to her feet. "I'll go see."

Elizabeth dropped her work into its basket and sat where she was, rubbing her aching knees and listening to footsteps, and voices, and doors opening and closing, first on the half-landing and then upstairs, where a balcony gave access to the bedrooms. A few minutes later Becky was back, towing a tall figure by the hand. "Look, Great-gran, Catherine's here!"

Catherine Duncan, widow of Elizabeth's son, James, was angular and pale, her drawn-back fine hair a uniform blond slightly lighter than its original shade. She wore a dark-brown, cowl-necked cashmere sweater over fawn wool trousers and narrow tan boots; diamond studs flashed from her earlobes, echoing a larger stone on her left hand. The flickering firelight made a shadow of an odd depression high on her right temple and glanced off an unevenness on the right side of her long jaw.

"Catherine," said Elizabeth, reaching out to take her daughter-in-law's hand. "I'm pleased you were able to get here."

"'Surprised' would be a better word," said Catherine, smoothing her hair as she sank into a wing chair. "Out in the godforsaken winter wilderness, at the end of a mile-long private road that will probably be impassable by tomorrow. I need a drink," she added, looking across the room toward the pine cabinet and hutch that served as bar. "I hate this place, I don't know why I came."

"You came because it's your son's fortieth birthday, and he insisted," said Elizabeth crisply. "Becky, please get your grandmother a glass of . . . wine?"

Catherine winced at "grandmother" and shook her head. "Not after the drive I've just endured. Gin, please, dear. Just over ice. Elizabeth, surely at your age you don't drive yourself up here from Sacramento?"

"I take a local-airline flight to the little airport in Mount Shasta and pick up the Ford Explorer the rental agency has waiting for me.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It's a nice big machine with snow tires and power everything, safe for even very old ladies."

"How nice." Frosty glass in hand, Catherine got to her feet and moved with apparent aimlessness around the room, pausing finally before the pictures hanging at one end of the west wall. The smallest frame contained a sepia-toned photograph of a tall man and a small boy: the stern-faced widower David Duncan and his son, Alexander, called Sandy, circa 1907. The other frames, much larger, displayed painted portraits of three men in middle years, each with thick fair hair and cold blue eyes and craggy features. Except for variations in posture and clothing, it was as if three different artists had painted the same man. "God, will you look at the Duncans. Sexy as hell and mean as the devil himself. Must be genetic."

"Not entirely, I don't think. James . . . was quite a nice little boy," Elizabeth added, pulling from deep in memory the round, cheerful baby she'd borne at nineteen, the lanky boy who was her helpful war-years companion until Sandy came home from the army, when James was fifteen, and made clear once again who was what in the Duncan household.

Catherine took a sip of gin and looked thoughtfully at the middle portrait. "James was mixed-up but basically okay when I met him," she said. "Maybe I was only eighteen to his twenty-five, but I wasn't stupid; I saw the hot temper and the bossiness, but he could be really sweet, too. But after his bastard of a father got killed, he started acting like he had to be Sandy, as hard and mean as he was." She tossed a challenging glance at Elizabeth, who chose to ignore it.

"Oh, well," she went on. "He was damned exciting when he wasn't mad or sad, and he made a lot of money. And he was—all of them are, were—obsessive about this place. James even dragged us home from a vacation in Paris one year, just so he could have some major birthday at Mountain Home." Catherine raised her glass to the portraits, made a little mock bow, and began to pace again.

"I remember," said Elizabeth. Five years later, mad or sad or possibly just drunk, he had died in a single-car accident on these mountain roads.

"So of course I was greatly relieved when you agreed to continue the tradition for Alex's big four-oh. He'd have made my life hell otherwise."

By cutting off your allowance? wondered Elizabeth, and then felt mildly guilty. Any woman who'd been married to a Duncan was entitled to a comfortable retirement. "If I've never been a doting grandmother, I'm not completely opposed to tradition."

"Hmph!" was what Catherine's reply sounded like. "You know what Alex has in mind for this weekend, don't you?" she added with a sidelong glance. "He's going to renew his campaign to have you deed this place to him. He went ballistic over your move to that expensive retirement 'resort,' as he calls it; and he's convinced that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you're going to wind up comatose in the nursing-home wing and drool away all that money Sandy left you, and Mountain Home as well."

"Too bad for Alex that Mountain Home and the money are mine."

"Elizabeth," said Catherine in tones of sweet reasonableness, "that attitude is irresponsible, especially since you don't actually give a damn about this place. When Alex is angry, he takes care to make everyone else miserable, including his children," she added with a glance at Becky. "You shouldn't take him on at your age; it's dangerous."

Becky, perched on her hassock in a comfortable huddle of arms and legs, straightened so quickly that she knocked over the yarn basket; but she subsided without speaking as Elizabeth smiled. For her own part, Elizabeth had always preferred Catherine the bitch to Catherine the fool. "Becky, would you play bartender again and bring me a touch of single malt?" she asked. "No ice. And you might top off your grandmother's drink."

Catherine finished her gin in two swallows and handed over the empty glass. "Elizabeth, there's something I've never understood," she began.

Many things, thought Elizabeth.

"James told me that Sandy built Mountain Home as a men's retreat or something. A place where the guys could come and play king of the hill. How is it that you came to own it?"

"Sandy—your great-grandfather Alexander," Elizabeth added to Becky, "had put much of our property in my name. For tax purposes and to keep it unconnected with the business. But he didn't expect to die at sixty, if at all. That avalanche must have been a dreadful surprise. And I'm sure his oversight is still causing him pain, wherever he is."

"There's another car coming," said Becky. She bounced to her feet and headed for the door.

Catherine gasped and clutched her drink. "My God, it's Alex. If he sees me drinking gin, he'll throw a fit."

"It's not Alex. He's not due until day after tomorrow."

"Unless he decides it would be fun to surprise us," Catherine said bitterly. "But who else . . . ? Oh God. Alex's little sad sack of a wife, I'd forgotten about her."

"Hush, you silly bitch!" snapped Elizabeth. Catherine recoiled as if she'd been slapped, and she was still flushed when Becky and her mother came into the room.

Jennifer Duncan was of medium height and narrow build; at thirty-three, she had streaks of silver in her short dark hair. Her wool pants fit her loosely; and against the pallor of her face, the crimson of her big sweater looked not cheery but garish. "Hello, Jenny. You're looking well," Elizabeth lied. "Welcome back to Mountain Home."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Thank you. I'm just a little tired from the drive," said Jenny. "And I've been lonely in that big house without my kids." She put an arm around Becky, who was standing close at her side.

"Ruth didn't come with you?"

Jenny shook her head. "Mother is furious with me. Washing her hands, I think she said."

"I'm sorry," Elizabeth said, meaning it. She'd been counting on the presence of no-nonsense Ruth Willis to help keep a volatile atmosphere from igniting. Now she took a firm grip on the arms of her chair and pulled herself to her feet, reaching for the cane that leaned against the stone of the fireplace. "Let's adjourn to the kitchen; I played master chef today, and Becky did the actual work, so there's plenty to eat. I think an early supper, and an early bedtime, would suit us all."

The next morning Elizabeth huddled under her down comforter, only vaguely aware of the murmur of voices downstairs, and drifted through other scenes, other times at this dreadful, lovely place. The big room full of the scent of pine from the enormous tree Sandy always cut for Christmas. The glory of Mount Shasta: Sandy had chosen a building site that gave them a breathtaking view of that majestic giant. Sandy blasting down the ski slopes as if the laws of gravity applied only to lesser mortals; Sandy red-faced and hard-fisted when his son was clumsy or defiant, his wife recalcitrant or unresponsive.

As hunger and the aroma of coffee brought her slowly back to the present world, Elizabeth tried to decide just what it was, in the more than thirty years since her husband's death, that had compelled her to keep up these miserable family gatherings. Guilt, probably—for the sins of omission that seemed, at this age, so much more dreadful than the other kind. How much there was that she ought to have done, that she had not done. Or that she had done too late.

She groaned softly, for the state of her soul and the aches in her body, and tried to collect enough strength to get out of bed and down the stairs. Dignity had dictated that she drag herself up here to her room the night before instead of following her preference and curling up on a couch by the fire like a tired old dog. Dignity was too expensive at her age, and perhaps at any age.

When she finally reached the kitchen, she found Jenny sifting flour into a bowl, a cookbook open on the counter beside her; Catherine was sitting at the table with a mug of coffee and a bottle of nail polish.

"Elizabeth. I was beginning to worry about you," said Catherine. She turned her gaze to the task of drawing a wet scarlet brush carefully along a talonlike scarlet nail. "Jenny, you'd better put on fresh coffee."

"What's left in the pot will be fine," said Elizabeth. "And I'll make

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

myself some toast. But I'll ask you, Catherine, to take that stuff elsewhere; I cannot abide the smell of nail polish, particularly in a kitchen."

Catherine rolled her eyes but capped the bottle. Elizabeth, hierarchy satisfactorily established, accepted a mug of coffee and a piece of toast from Jenny and set about organizing the rest of the day.

"Jenny, I see, is making the birthday cake," she noted. "And Becky?"

"She's clearing the snow off the deck," said Jenny. "So we can take the shutters down. Alex always wants to look at the mountain."

"Good. As soon as she's through, Catherine, I'll give you the shopping list—we're low on liquor, among other things—and you and Becky can drive into Mount Shasta. Becky knows where we shop."

Catherine protested, but finally agreed to go so long as she could drive Elizabeth's four-wheeler. Once she and Becky were well away, Elizabeth made a fresh pot of coffee and settled down to observe her granddaughter-in-law. Jenny had spent a stretch in a hospital the previous year, after an "accident" involving several broken ribs led to a collapsed lung. She had not yet regained her former weight, nor, in Elizabeth's opinion, her former ease of movement. Of course, she might have had more recent accidents.

"I learned only when Alex called me about his birthday that he was back in town," said Elizabeth. "If you're looking for the layer pans, they're on the top shelf of the Lazy Susan."

"Thanks." Jenny turned to the corner cupboard and rustled around in the forest of pans.

"Have you definitely decided to take him back? Is that what your mother is angry about?"

Jenny picked up one from the trio of round pans and began to grease it, head bent to her task. "He's my husband. Father Flynn says I should take him back, because marriage is a sacrament. And besides that, I love him."

"Was it Father Flynn who arranged for Alex to spend time in a psychiatric facility?"

Jenny nodded, greasing another pan. "He knew about this good place in New York state, and we all agreed it was better to try that than go to court."

"Better for whom?"

"For all of us. Even if I'd brought charges against Alex and won, which wasn't all that likely, he'd probably just have gotten probation or something. And then he'd have been really mad. Is there an electric mixer?"

"No, you'll have to beat the egg whites the old-fashioned way, with a whisk. In the center drawer."

Jenny found the tool, propped the big metal bowl on one hip, and began to beat. "Alex has the money and he knows everybody in Sacramento," she said. "Through the bank and the business. I couldn't sup-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

port my kids by myself; and anyway, I'd never get custody. He's promised Father Flynn he'll go for counseling. And he's better, he really is."

As Jenny set the bowl on the counter to switch beating hands, Elizabeth saw a dark circlet of bruise on her forearm, and a discoloration on one cheekbone.

"What about the children? Is he 'better' with them?"

"Jimmy is big and strong. He'll be all right, I think. And Alex has almost promised I can send Beck away to school in September."

Once again, Elizabeth let herself think of her own son as a child. James, too, had been big and strong, and stubborn, qualities that had worked against him in his dealings with Sandy. She took a mouthful of lukewarm coffee, finding it less bitter than her own soul. Who was she to urge someone else to take brave risks?

"You'll miss Becky," she said, sad on her own behalf as well.

"I know. But she's finally beginning to, you know, mature. I couldn't bear it if something, you know, happened to her."

"Something . . . " After a long moment, understanding of what Jenny was trying to say hit Elizabeth like a fist slammed against her diaphragm. "Jennifer," she began, and had to pause to draw breath. "Jenny, has Alex ever abused his daughter sexually?"

"No. Absolutely not. But you know what a bad temper he has, and with me, his anger sometimes takes a, well, a sexual turn." Jenny lowered her eyes, her face swept by a deep flush that surely sprang from something beyond embarrassment. Shame and pleasure so mingled as to be indistinguishable from each other; in this recognition, Elizabeth was herself startled and shamed by a faint flutter of warmth like a physical memory. Sisters under the skin, and a sorry lot we are.

Jenny's face was fading to its normal pallor, and she knit her brows in a frown. "See, sometimes when I'm feeling low, I get these dark thoughts. Like, what about when Beck starts to look like a woman, and he gets mad at her? But then I realize I'm being silly, there's absolutely no reason to think he'd get out of line that way with his daughter." She slid the mass of beaten egg white into the cake bowl and began to fold everything carefully together with a spatula.

The narrow, bruised face was intent now: good wife creating a tribute to her husband. Elizabeth tipped too much coffee into her mouth, choked and sputtered and reached into her robe pocket for a tissue.

"Are you all right?" Jenny put her work down and came around the table to pat the older woman gently on the back.

"Oh, I'm fine. Just fine."

"I didn't mean to upset you," said Jenny. "You've been wonderful with Becky, she's crazy about you. Don't you worry, Elizabeth," she added with another pat. "She's my daughter, too, and I'll watch out

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for her. Father Flynn will help me. For now, let's just tiptoe through the rest of this celebration and hope everybody gets along."

In the afternoon the weather changed dramatically. The low gray clouds, having released a light fall of snow, retreated, giving way to a sky of sublime blue and a white landscape reflecting low winter sunlight with a brilliance almost intolerable to the unprotected eye. But it was cold, so cold that only Becky ventured out, and she was back quickly, pink of nose.

Jenny worked in the kitchen, Becky helping when needed. Catherine paced for a while, read for a while, finally opened a bottle of white wine, found a deck of cards, and settled down to sip and play solitaire.

Elizabeth sat by the fire and gazed out the now unshuttered deck doors and thought, sometimes, that she could see the past out there like a scatter of set-pieces in an outdoor museum. She would not come here again, whoever owned the place; would stay safely tucked up in her apartment where it was warm and safe: nothing sharp there to graze the unwary shin or jab at the unguarded memory.

Night came all at once, as if someone somewhere had flicked a switch. There were stars in that frozen sky, Elizabeth noted as she moved about to loosen her bones and watched Becky carry in enough wood to keep fireplace and woodstove going until morning. Probably a moon, too—later.

How very slowly time passed when the company was uneasy in itself as well as apprehensive about what was to come—or who. They had pre-dinner drinks around the fireplace, even Becky, who was permitted a tiny glass of sherry. In the kitchen, later, Catherine opened a bottle of red wine—to toast the chocolate glory of the birthday cake on the counter, she said, as well as to accompany the light supper Jenny had put together.

Afterwards they retired to the main-room hearth with coffee and hot chocolate, as well as decanters of brandy and port. Liquor was not likely to make anyone relaxed or sociable tonight, Elizabeth thought; but it might make them sleep better. When a cracking log startled everyone to temporary alertness at about nine P.M., Elizabeth waved them all off to their beds.

"Great-gran, are you drunk?" Becky, who had watched her mother and her grandmother totter off rather unsteadily, now turned a worried frown on Elizabeth.

"No. I'm merely old, and the stairs are steep. I'm going to sleep here on the couch, by the fireplace. But first I'll ask you to bring me my small comforter, from the chaise in my room."

Elizabeth's speech was unslurred, her movements from chair to couch no more stiff than usual. Reassured, Becky ran upstairs and returned with the comforter, to tuck it around her grandmother.

"Good night, dear. Leave your door open, for the heat."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes, ma'am." Becky bent to kiss the soft wrinkled cheek, checked that the fireplace screen was tight, and went upstairs again, to the "children's" room with its two walls of bunkbeds. There she burrowed deep under her own comforter and tried to plan how she would deal with the next day, how she could keep out of her father's way without freezing to death. She slept almost at once and dreamed briefly of snow and huge bears and then of nothing at all.

When the blast of noise came, her eyes snapped open but her mind, still sleep-clogged, dithered. A dream. Or a tree, cracking from the weight of snow. But maybe not.

She heard the others stirring, her mother calling out and then Catherine's voice, sharp and demanding. Becky shoved her feet into slippers and ran out onto the balcony; someone had turned on the overhead light and she saw a tall robed figure ahead of her, pale hair—Catherine, careening down the stairs.

"What's happened? Great-gran?" Becky called, suddenly in a panic. The main room was lit only by the glow of the fireplace embers and a great wash of moonlight from outside, from the shattered door to the deck. Catherine was there now, a silhouette in that white light . . . and by the fireplace an overturned chair and something tangled in it.

"Oh, Great-gran!" she wailed, and stepped over the old woman to lift the heavy rocker and set it aside. Catherine was shrieking something, but Becky paid no attention, kneeling to put her face close to Elizabeth's. Breathing, faint but steady. Then a hand came up to touch the eye patch, which was slightly askew; and the good eye opened, closed, opened again.

"Great-gran, you're alive."

"I . . . do seem to be."

"Oh my God!" This was her mother's voice, more astonished than frightened. Coming from the deck, where Catherine was still wailing. Becky got to her feet and peered around for a moment before finding the switch for the electric wall sconces.

"Becky!" Her mother again, from the broken door; Becky took a step in that direction.

"No! Don't come out here! Something has happened to your father. Catherine, shut up!"

Becky turned to look again at Elizabeth, stretched out on her back now with both hands clasped to her chest. There beside her was what Becky had at first taken to be the old woman's cane; now she bent to take a closer look.

"Great-gran. Where did that come from? That gun?"

"Gun? Oh yes, the shotgun." The old woman's voice was faint. "That's what you carry when you mean to shoot snowshoe hares. Or to start the snow moving and clear the slopes. On avalanche patrol."

"Becky, go call nine-one-one," ordered her mother. "At once."

"Yeah, right. Great-gran, will you be okay for a minute?"

"Yes," voice definitely stronger now. Becky hurried off to the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

kitchen and the telephone. From behind her she could hear Catherine wailing still: "Oh my God oh my God!" And then the sound of a slap, and her mother's voice: "Go upstairs and get some warm clothes on!"

She hung up the telephone and returned to Elizabeth's side, dodging Catherine, who was on her way to the stairs, hands over her face. "Mom?" she called. "They're coming. But it's really cold in here. Can you help me get Great-gran to the kitchen?".

Jenny came in, white-faced but steady, and the two of them carried Elizabeth, small and light as a child, to a daybed beside the kitchen woodstove. Becky ran back for the comforter, tucked it around the old woman, and then began to build up the fire in the stove. Jenny, after another look outside, came back in and closed the pocket door and put a pot of coffee on.

"It's . . . unkind to just leave him alone. But we'd freeze out there."

"Mom, what happened?" Becky asked in a near-whisper.

"I don't know."

"I was dozing more than sleeping, and I heard something outside." Elizabeth's voice was soft but clear. "There have been break-ins up here, you know. So I got the shotgun."

The others came closer but kept silent.

"Nothing. Maybe a deer. I wrapped up in the comforter. Sat in my chair. Dozed again." She closed her eyes and fluttered her left hand across her chest to her right shoulder. "You know, I think I may have broken something."

"Just lie quiet, Elizabeth, and wait for the doctor. We'll talk later," said Jenny.

"I hope he doesn't take long. It's quite painful. Sometime later there was another noise, and I opened my eyes and saw this huge man outside the door. Right against the glass. With a rifle; I saw it. I yelled, I think, and he didn't go away. The gun was there in my hands, and I—I must have pulled the trigger."

"Oh, Elizabeth." Jenny took the old woman's hands in her own. "It was an accident. It wasn't your fault, you mustn't blame yourself."

Such a complicated balancing act, blame was, hedged about with what-ifs and might-haves. There was always more than enough blame to go around, and Elizabeth knew better than to think she would avoid her share. "It was Alex, wasn't it?" she asked.

"Yes, but you didn't know that."

"Was Jimmy with him?"

"Jimmy? No, of course not," said Jenny. "Jimmy couldn't come this time, remember? There's nobody out there on the deck but Alex."

Elizabeth closed her eye, sighed, and said, very softly, "Pity." ●

NOTE TO READERS: If you are having trouble finding *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* at your favorite retailer, let us help. First, let the store manager know that you would like the store to carry *EQMM*. Then, send us a letter or postcard with the store's full name and address so that we can contact them too. Write to us at: Dell Magazines Fiction Group, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT, 06855-1220

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

UNDER THE KNIFE

by Phil Lovesey

Mystery writers Peter and Phil Lovesey, father and son, have one thing in common though they write in very different styles: both are masters of the mystery plot. In their different ways, each author consistently manages that twist in the "tail" of a story that mystery readers love. Also characteristic of Phil Lovesey is a penchant for diabolical setups, in which his characters are presented with impossible choices—as in this new tale. †

"And now," announced the contented surgeon, moving to the CD player, "for a spot of Viv . . ."

The opening bars of *The Four Seasons* drifted through the sumptuous lakeland cottage. The elderly surgeon smiled, watching the swell of his cognac as it circled inside the crystal brandy balloon. Then he downed it, completely satisfied, before pouring another.

He raised the glass to the luxurious empty room. "To weekends," he said. "Solitude and quiet. Far from the madding crowd. Cheers!" The second glass followed the first. He settled on the leather sofa, dipped into a bowl of dry-roasted peanuts, kicked off his shoes, and began the latest Dick Francis, while the wind howled outside. How he adored Friday nights. . . .

He hadn't got three pages past the first murder when a sharp rap on the thick wooden front door disturbed him from the absorbing narrative.

He looked up astonished, completely unprepared for the sudden interruption. There it was again. Another knock, louder than the first. Cursing, he crossed the room to stand by the door.

"Yes?" he barked, frowning at the darkened wood.

The reply was urgent, unfamiliar. "Please help! There's been an accident. Someone's hurt!"

The surgeon cursed again. Accident? On a Friday night? Here? Bloody typical! Reluctantly, he opened the door, allowing a cold gust of night and a rain-lashed young man into his warm, hallowed sanctuary. He shut the door quickly, turning to the unexpected visitor, who stood in his waterproofs, dripping onto the lush Chinese rug.

©1998 by Phil Lovesey

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Jesus, it's pouring out there!"

"The accident?" the surgeon asked irritably, resigning himself to a disturbed night.

The young man smiled. "It hasn't happened yet, Granddad."

"I'm not sure I . . . ?"

But the young man had already pounced, throwing the elderly surgeon to the floor, straddling him easily. "Just so we both understand," he hissed. "I'm here to talk. Give me the answers and I'll go."

The old man struggled under the younger's rain-sodden bulk. "If it's money you want—"

The youth struck the surgeon's face with a cold hand. "Not listening, are we?" he teased, watching a spreading red patch on the puffy cheek. God, he was going to enjoy this! "I suggest we start again." He climbed off the old man. "Mr. Cedric Pinkerton."

The surgeon struggled to find his feet, fear now showing on his smarting face. The maniac knew his name! He thought fast. "I'm expecting friends at any minute," he croaked. "Just leave me now, and I won't say a word. Please."

The young man slumped in a red leather Chesterfield. "You can do better than that," he moaned. "I've followed you for weeks. Every Friday night, the same. You head out of Harley Street straight up here. No visitors. Ever."

Pinkerton lunged for the phone, swiftly pressing nine-nine-nine with shaking fingers.

"I've already cut the line, Granddad. Not outside the cottage, mind. Further down, where it runs into the woods. The police will just think a tree blew against it during the night." He smiled again, baring yellowing teeth. "A cruel coincidence."

Pinkerton replaced the useless receiver, studying his assailant's face in more detail. Gaunt, unshaven, wild-eyed. A drug addict, perhaps? Escapee from the local asylum? And why on earth had he been singled out for the deranged man's pleasure?

He took two deep breaths, trying to steady his nerves. "Do I know you?"

The young man clapped sarcastically as Nigel Kennedy stuck rigidly to Vivaldi in the background. "Now we're getting somewhere, Granddad!"

"Well?"

"You certainly used to. Had an intimate knowledge, I'd say."

Pinkerton racked his brains. Nothing about the man seemed familiar. He stared blankly back. "An ex-patient?" he offered, knowing he couldn't have treated the fellow since going private.

"Keep going."

"From the early days?"

The young man nodded.

"The very early days?"

He nodded again, this time adding a patronizing frown. "I made

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

your reputation, old boy." He looked around him at the opulent trappings. "Feathered your goddamned nest."

Pinkerton gasped. The memories flooded back. Flash bulbs, questions, and the crying child in his arms. Surely it couldn't be . . . ?

The youth nodded again, reading the old man's mind.

"Ben?" Pinkerton whispered. "You?"

He was up on his feet, arms outstretched in the centre of the room. "At your service, Mr. Pinkerton." He extended a hand. "Ben Hopkins. Or as I used to be known—Ben, the Miracle Baby!"

"Ben?" Pinkerton repeated in sheer bewilderment, trying to reconcile distant memories of a tiny ball of gurgling flesh with the ranting figure pacing the floor.

The words fell quickly from Hopkins's pale lips. "Ben Hopkins. Born seventh May, nineteen seventy-three, with a collapsed lung and a hole in the heart. Enter suave, good-looking children's surgeon Cedric Pinkerton, whose mission, should he choose to accept it, to save the tiny tot and enhance his reputation considerably."

"That's not fair!" Pinkerton protested. "I'd taken the Hippocratic oath. It was my duty to save life, whenever posible."

Hopkins dismissed the suggestion, pressing on. "Six hours under the knife, as the nation held its breath. The life-saving operation is a complete success! The press arrive in droves for a stitch-by-stitch account. The legend of Ben the Miracle Baby is born."

"All this because I saved your life?"

Hopkins turned angrily, pointing a bony finger. "Saved?" he shouted. *"J'accuse,* Cedric Pinkerton, of destroying me, my family, and any chance I had of a normal life, while you reaped the profits from my rotten insides!" He unzipped his waterproofed jacket and pulled up a stained T-shirt to reveal a large pink scar running from his abdomen to his chest. "Your stitches in time must have saved you about nine million, eh?"

Pinkerton shook his throbbing head. "You would have died, Ben. I couldn't allow that. No one else was prepared to take the risks and perform the surgery. Your parents were desperate. . . ."

"My parents?" Hopkins exploded. "Want to know what happened to them?"

Pinkerton sighed heavily, his mind still frantically working to resolve the crisis. Whatever happened, Hopkins was younger and stronger. He might even be armed. Conversation seemed the best way to placate the man. "They divorced," he said slowly. "I do read the papers, you know. I did take an interest."

"From your flash Harley Street offices?" Hopkins hit back. "That must have been distasteful, reading about our grubby little world!"

"Look," Pinkerton tried to control his temper. "Your parents did their own deals with the press. . . ."

"And the advertising agencies," Hopkins replied bitterly. "Christ! They had me posing in different brands of nappies before you could

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

say, 'Thank you, the cheque's in the post!' All tastefully done, though. They even airbrushed out the scar."

"I'm sorry, Ben," Pinkerton replied. "I truly am. But I can't be held responsible for what happened after you left my care. I saved you, but I couldn't save you from the world."

Hopkins laughed out loud, a hollow bark ringing round the plush interior. "Of course, I was a bloody laughingstock at school. Imagine, a young boy struggling to make his way, always remembered as 'that miracle kid.' And all I saw was everyone else creaming off the profits. I grew to despise them all. But most of all" —he went and sat by Pinkerton, reclining on the sofa— "I completely despise you."

"Like I said, I wasn't to— "

"Shut it!" Another smack on the old man's face. More pleasure for Hopkins. "I dropped out of school, college, life. Got in with a new crowd, those who couldn't give a damn who I was, providing we could score some crack."

Pinkerton closed his eyes. "And that's what you want now, Ben? Money for drugs? Twisted revenge, is it? Go and see the man who toiled so desperately to save your life, then force him to give you the money to destroy it?"

Hopkins helped himself to a large brandy. "Not at all, Granddad. I'm off the gear now. One hell of an effort, believe me. But I'm clean. Want to know what saw me through the dark days?"

Pinkerton nodded slowly.

"The thought of this," Hopkins beamed. "You and me, here, right now. Our cosy little chat, miles from anywhere. Anyone."

Pinkerton made his second move, rising from the sofa. "I need the toilet."

Hopkins shoved him down. "And nip out so you can call the Old Bill on your mobile? Do me a favour. I do so hate your repeated assumption that I'm incredibly stupid. I've had a long time to think about this."

"But I need a pee!" Pinkerton protested.

Hopkins pointed to the roaring fire. "Put that out if you're desperate. You ain't leaving my sight."

Pinkerton had had enough. "Listen, Ben," he threatened. "I come here at the weekends to relax. I do not intend to have my privacy invaded by damn junkies with chips on their shoulders. I gave you life. If it spat back at you, then tough. Those are the breaks."

"You destroyed my life the moment you saved it!"

"I had no choice!"

"The Hippocratic oath?"

Pinkerton nodded furiously. "Now what do you want, eh? I'm sick of all this!"

Hopkins sat quietly on the floor, considering the old man's argument. "Maybe you're right," he conceded. "After all, here you are,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with all your wealth and reputation, and your life hasn't exactly been a bowl of cherries, has it?"

Pinkerton said nothing, wondering what Hopkins had planned.

"Take, for example, the good Mrs. Pinkerton. Quite a catch for the middle-aged surgeon."

"What are you driving at?"

"That made the papers, too, didn't it? The wedding, and the divorce." He poured himself another brandy. "As you'll appreciate, I take more than a passing interest in your affairs."

Pinkerton's eyes narrowed. "We were unlucky. It didn't work out."

Hopkins shook his head and smiled. "How we kid ourselves, eh? She dumped you, Pinkerton. Ran off with another bloke. Real good-looking type. What was the name, now? Fines, yes, that's it, Steve Fines. A builder, I believe, who even helped dig your swimming pool. What was that headline again?" Hopkins scratched his head thoughtfully. " 'Builder Has Dip with Miracle Baby Doc's Missus!' Crude, but effective."

"Which goes to prove my point," Pinkerton replied through gritted teeth. "I've had plenty of knocks, too, but I don't turn up on my mother's doorstep blaming her for having me in the first place."

Hopkins smiled, then reached for a peanut, tossing it high into the air and catching it in his mouth. He nodded, munching on the nut. "I'm sorry," he said. "You're quite right. It was your duty to save me, and so you did. Anything which has happened since is simply the unpredictable machinations of the Hand of Fate. Or— I've made a dog's dinner out of my life and really shouldn't hold you to task over it." He rose to leave.

Pinkerton regarded him suspiciously. The manner was too patronising, the exit too sudden. There was more, he sensed it.

Hopkins turned at the door. "This, um, Hippocratic oath?"

"Yes, Ben?" The fear began to return.

"Well, just say, hypothetically, of course, that a young Adolf Hitler walks into your surgery one day. Would you treat him?"

The first bead of perspiration broke from Pinkerton's brow. Why wouldn't the bastard simply go, leave him to pack and head straight back for London? "If the condition was immediately life-threatening, Ben, then I'd have no alternative. As doctors, we aren't empowered to make moral judgements. Anyway, it's been . . . strange to see you again."

Hopkins smiled once more, extending a hand and shaking Pinkerton's enthusiastically. "Likewise," he said. "And I'm sorry for all the . . ."

"Don't be," Pinkerton gladly replied, opening the door.

"I just needed answers, you know? Needed to know you'd acted for my good, not yours."

Pinkerton's heart raced as he watched Hopkins step through the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

door and make his way to a large saloon car parked outside. Relief flooded through him. He was going, the bastard was going!

"Go inside," Hopkins shouted above the wind. "You'll catch your death!"

Pinkerton closed the door smartly behind him, leaning against the warm wood, shaking with gratitude.

Something was wrong. Why didn't the idiot start the car? Maybe he had, maybe Pinkerton just hadn't heard. Maybe Hopkins was already driving down the lane, taking his insane ramblings back through the deep, dark woods.

Pinkerton nearly jumped through his skin as Hopkins hammered on the door once more. Too late to slide the locking bolt, Pinkerton was pushed backwards as Hopkins burst in, struggling under the weight of a large canvas sack over his shoulder. A large, moving canvas sack.

"Just couldn't leave it at that," Hopkins gasped, moving unsteadily to the centre of the room and throwing the sack onto the floor. "I mean, you could have been lying, couldn't you?"

Pinkerton's eyes were rooted to the moving sack. It was struggling, definitely struggling. Muted cries competed with Vivaldi's final movement. Fear gripped Pinkerton's throat, and he watched in sheer terror as Hopkins unwrapped the wriggling bundle.

There, trussed with rope and tape, lay the sweat-sodden, gagged body of Steve Fines.

Hopkins turned to his infant saviour. "Thought we'd ask for a second opinion," he grinned.

"What the hell's going on?" Pinkerton asked, bottom jaw wobbling.

"Kitchen?" Hopkins demanded.

Pinkerton dumbly pointed, watching him disappear for a few seconds then return with a wicked-looking carving knife and a steel-tipped wooden tenderising mallet.

Fines struggled with even more fervour once Hopkins began to cut the ropes.

"Some anaesthetic required, wouldn't you say, Doctor?" Hopkins casually announced, bringing the mallet swiftly down on Fines's skull with a hideous crushing blow. "There, out cold. Now the game begins."

Pinkerton struggled for breath. "You're bloody mad!" he gasped.

Hopkins waved an admonishing finger. "I'd call it thorough." He rolled Fines's unconscious head in his hands, tenderly. "Good-looking sod. No wonder your wife dropped her drawers for him."

Pinkerton raised himself, strength returning, adrenalin coursing through his elderly veins. He lunged at Hopkins's squatting figure, but was easily pushed aside.

"Sit down, old man!" Hopkins bellowed, brandishing the knife before turning his attention to the stretched white neck in his lap. "I'd say," he said slowly, "it's about here!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pinkerton cried in terror as Hopkins deliberately stuck the knife into Fines's throat. A hiss of air preceded the first gurgling spurt of crimson blood.

Hopkins stepped back smartly. "Over to you, Mr. Surgeon," he grinned evilly, sitting back on the sofa surveying his handiwork. "Jesus, it really spurts up, doesn't it?"

Pinkerton raced to the punctured body, groping at the neck wound, trying to stem the flow. "What have you done?" he cried in total desperation.

Hopkins picked at his fingernails with the bloodied knife. "Essentially," he said brightly, "it's an ethical conundrum. Do you stick to your Hippocratic oath and save the man you detest more than anyone else in the world, or let him die so he'll never share your ex-wife's bed again?"

"You bloody maniac!"

Hopkins pulled a silly face. "Not as bloody as you are at the moment, Doctor. Shouldn't you be doing something a little more life-saving? That is, if you want me to really believe all this oath nonsense."

"A tourniquet!" Pinkerton pleaded as Fines's body wriggled beneath him. "A tea towel, anything!"

Hopkins poured himself another brandy, tossed another nut. "I swear by Apollo the physician, and Asclepius and Health, and to all the gods and goddesses. . . . That's how it starts, isn't it?"

"The tea towel, now!" Blood was seeping through Pinkerton's fingers, loosening his grip on the wound.

". . . to reckon him who taught me this Art equally dear to me as my parents, to share my substance with him . . ."

"The kitchen! Please!"

Hopkins slowly wandered towards the kitchen. ". . . and relieve his necessities if required . . . blah, blah, blah . . . and abstain from whatever is deleterious and mischievous . . ." He returned with a neatly folded tea towel, dangling it inches from Pinkerton's desperate grasp.

"For God's sake!"

Hopkins dropped the towel. "Funny to think," he mused. "Last time we worked together all those years ago, it was me that was under the knife."

"Call an ambulance!"

Hopkins shrugged his shoulders. "Phone don't work," he sang teasingly.

"My mobile, upstairs! In my case. Hurry!"

Hopkins bowed and left the room once more, leaving Pinkerton to tie the white towel around Fines's spurting neck. In seconds a crimson blood spot burst from the cloth like a flowering rose.

Hopkins returned with the portable phone. "Oh no," he sighed,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dropping it on the floor and crushing it with his boot. "Now it's broken."

"You stupid fool!" Pinkerton exploded. "What the hell are we going to do now?"

Hopkins ambled to the front door, cheekily waving goodbye with the carving knife, before reappearing several moments later. "Fortunately for Mr. Fines," he said, "he has an enduring love affair with the fresh-water trout." He placed a small plastic box by Pinkerton's side. "He's an angler. Spends most days by the river when he's not . . . you know, with your ex. It's where I bumped into him earlier today. I've been following Mr. Fines for some time, also." Hopkins flipped open the lid to reveal a selection of barbed fishing flies and coiled lines. "Perfect do-it-yourself suturing kit, wouldn't you say, Doc?"

Pinkerton was appalled. "Surely you're not . . . ?"

"Sew away, Doc!" Hopkins merrily replied. "That tea towel's going to be drenched in a minute." He picked up the tenderising mallet. "Some more anaesthetic before the big op?"

The professional in Pinkerton took over. "Put that down," he hissed. "Give me some twine. Thread it."

Hopkins whistled. "I'm impressed. Really, I am. But are you actually going to do it? Save the man who stole your woman. Stitch him up so he can slide back into bed with her, picking up where he left off?" He leaned closer, whispering in Pinkerton's ear. "I know all about you, Cedric. Made it my mission. You hate this man. You want him dead, don't you?"

"Give me the thread!"

"Why not let him die? Who's to know? He just simply disappeared on a fishing trip. That's his car, you know, outside."

"The thread!"

"Follow your heart, Cedric," Hopkins teased. "Let him bleed to death. No one knows he's here. Stuff the corpse in the boot, bury the car in the woods, clean up, and bingo, he's just another missing person. Who knows, you might be the first one your old lady turns to for comfort."

Pinkerton grabbed the proffered twine and barb, looking Hopkins squarely in the eye. "This is what you wanted, was it? What you planned for?" He unwrapped the towel, pressing on the gaping wound once more before commencing the first closing stitch. "I'll try to save him, exactly like I tried to save you. There's no difference!" A geyser of blood spurted high into the air. "Scissors!" he barked.

Hopkins stared blankly back.

"To cut the stitch, man!"

Hopkins shrugged his shoulders.

"The kitchen drawer! Now! Or he's going to die!"

Hopkins lazily fetched the scissors, leaning down and cutting the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nylon fishing line himself. "I'd love to believe you. It all sounds so pure, so noble."

"What?" Pinkerton replied sharply, already working feverishly on the next stitch.

Hopkins leant forward and cut the next stitch obligingly. "You see, I maintain that your decision to save me was an entirely calculating one. You took a big risk with my life in order to enhance your own."

"Never!"

"Come on, Cedric," Hopkins replied, taking another handful of nuts. "It was a career move, with no thoughts for the consequences to me."

"You're wrong!"

"What? You're denying your riches?"

The next stitch was in, barely stemming the flow. "The money came later," Pinkerton replied quietly. "I haven't got a bloody crystal ball, man!"

"You used me! An innocent baby!"

"I saved a dying one!"

Hopkins settled back on the sofa and poured himself another brandy. "I didn't come here to argue," he said calmly. "That's why I devised this little test." He pointed to Fines's blood-soaked body. "You save him, and I'll believe all your ethical nonsense. Save the man you most despise, and I'll know you put my tiny body, my life, ahead of the money."

"You're sick!" Pinkerton was frantically trying to control the bleeding. "It's no good," he moaned. "He's going to die!"

"But what about the oath, Doc?"

"I've done all I can, for Christ's sake! He needs hospital attention, now!"

Hopkins pulled a mock face of astonishment. "You really want him to live, don't you?"

"I have no choice." Pinkerton made one last appeal. "Ben," he whispered, "if you have any humanity in you, we have to get him to hospital, now. If we could get him into the car, we could still save him."

"We? This is your problem, Doc. Your test."

Pinkerton screamed at the seated, grinning figure. "I can't do any more for him!"

"Well, you'd better take him to hospital then. Wrap him up and stick him in the car. Come on, you can do it!"

Pinkerton struggled to shift the barely living body.

"More effort, Doc!"

"You have to help!" Pinkerton gasped, sliding Fines on the blood-soaked floorboards towards the door.

"Tell you what," Hopkins offered brightly. "I'll open the car for you." He stood from the sofa, tossing another nut nonchalantly into the air.

Pinkerton struggled on, reaching the door, dragging Fines outside

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

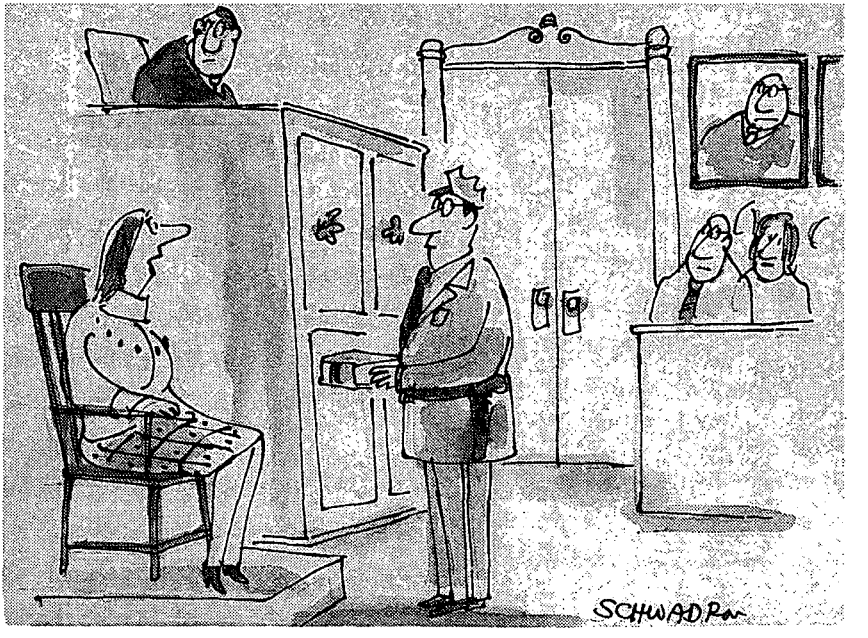
drifted streets. I parked and followed Sughrue across the parking lot to the station, seeing his steps get stiff and lurchy. And slow. I followed him up the stairs to the second floor even slower, hearing his breath get loud and raspy as he pulled himself up the steps one at a time, and I mean, One. At. A. Time.

I never saw his face again. Not while he was alive, anyway. I stood there at the top of the stairs and watched the back of him ooze down the hall to his office and get the door closed. Then I figured it was safe and I told Rosey to call the lieutenant.

Lieutenant Franklin retired a few years back, then died or something. So no one but me remembers pushing open the door to Sughrue's office and seeing him sprawled back in his chair, white like Smollett was, white like the snow, with his coat hanging open and red blood spread all over his shirt and down on the floor. The same blood that was trailed from the front of Smollett's desk into the bathroom where last night he'd gone to stop the bleeding and thought he had till he went down in the snow and opened up the wound again.

But all that was a long time ago, and nobody remembers Sughrue much anymore, and us who were there reported what we had to and covered up the rest and never talked about it after. In a few years it was like it never happened at all. Like I say, I'd even quit seeing Sughrue's picture on the wall till the new kid made a point of it.

And even though I looked at it again on the way out that night, it didn't mean much to me; just some guy I killed once, that's all. ●



"The truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth? Goodness, make up your mind."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

White Like the Snow

by Dan Stumpf

A chief of police by day, Ohioan Dan Stumpf writes a wickedly tongue-in-cheek tale of police malfeasance. Having served on the police force of his suburban town for nearly twenty-five years, the author appears to have at his disposal a treasure trove of material on which to base his stories. His understated, offbeat sense of humor is, no doubt, a natural gift—one we hope will bring cheer to your holidays. ✝

Lieutenant Mayhew brought one of the rookies upstairs to the detective bureau last week, I guess to show where he could go in a few years if he kept his pants clean. I did my bit to make an impression by hiding the magazine I was reading under a report I closed out six weeks ago. Not for Nicky-New-Guy, you understand, but more for Mayhew's benefit. Anyway, the kid got to looking at some of the old photos we hang around the place and damn if he didn't spot an old one of Sergeant Sughrue, smiling at the camera like a clean shotgun, and ask who it was.

"Someone before my time." Mayhew's one of the chief's five-year wonders. He looked at the picture closer, then half turned to me. "How 'bout it, Jake? You know this guy?"

Yeah, I knew him; time was when half the folks in town lived in mortal fear of Sergeant "Sugar" Sughrue and the rest of us just worried about him a lot. But nobody remembers him much these days, and the picture'd hung there so long I quit seeing it myself. So I said, "That's just some guy I killed once." The kid hesitated, laughed; Mayhew laughed, then pushed him down the hall and I got back to my magazine.

Not that I actually *did* kill Sughrue; that was just hype. Hell, I been here almost twenty years and never even shot anybody very much. But I was there when Sughrue died, and I maybe had something to do with it, so I guess what I told the kid wasn't too far off the mark at that.

It was Christmas morning, maybe ten years ago, maybe not that long. And it was snowing to beat hell; over a foot since midnight and no end

©1998 by Dan Stumpf

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in sight. I was supposed to take care of business in the detective bureau, but there wasn't much, this being Christmas in the suburbs, so I brought in a portable TV to pass the time. I was lugging it into the station and I passed Dibbs on the way out—he has the cubicle next to mine—and we wished each other "Merry Christmas" kind of automatically.

At least it was automatic for me; Dibbs took it serious, though, and stopped to look sorry for me. "Damn, Jake," he said, "nothing worse than working Christmas, is there?"

Well, there's lots of things worse than working Christmas at a suburban police department: young love and getting your foot stuck in a cannon are the two I know most about, but there's bound to be more. Actually, with not much work to do and all the food folks bring in, it's not bad at all. But I looked mournful for Dibbs's sake and went in to goof off for eight hours.

It should have been that simple. I wish it had been, sometimes. I mean, Sughrue was a pain all right, but what I went through was sure a tall price to get rid of him. And on Christmas, too.

I should tell you about Sergeant "Sugar" Sughrue. Lots of folks used to wonder what made him act so mean all the time, but I think he just figured if you got a God-given talent for something, you oughta use it, and he sure as hell had the touch for making folks around him unhappy. If not plain scared. See, Sughrue was big and fast and strong, and he could shoot good. Him and me, we were on the range one time and he put five shots in a playing card fifty feet away while I was still pulling my piece out of the holster and looking for the target. That's how good he was.

He was smart, too, and he liked to show it off. No one I ever saw at the station ever won an argument with Sughrue. Even if they were right. Sughrue'd just talk and argue and beat on them with words till they gave up. You win arguments that way, but you never convince anybody.

Being dangerous and capable like he was, it's no wonder Sughrue made sergeant fast. And it's no wonder he didn't go any farther. Once he got into a spot where he could give orders and chew folks out on a regular basis, the brass could see how much he liked it, which was way too much. And about that time, talk started about him and the crowd at Smokey's, and that was pretty much as far as his career ever went.

So that's all you need to know about Sughrue, except he shouldn't even have been in that day; sergeants get holidays off unless we call them in for something, and Sughrue being like he was, the building could burn down, no one would call him. But I hadn't been there more than an hour and in he comes, looking like hell's own hangover. He didn't even stop to rag me; just shuffled into his office and shut the door.

Well, it was good I didn't have to talk to him, but bad, too, because

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

any minute he might come back out, so I couldn't get *too* laid back. No idea how long he'd be in there or even what he was doing here on Christmas. If Sughrue came out and saw me having fun, or not looking busy enough, or even just not looking miserable, he'd make sure I got that way in a hurry.

I sighed, turned off my TV, and went to the dispatch room to find a magazine I could hide under a report; old tricks are still the best.

It was quiet in there, too. Sometimes phones ring and guys yammer on the radio all the time, but this being Christmas, no one was doing much. Ed Rosemont turned from the radio console when I came in; his big swivel chair groaning under him made the only noise in the room. I gave him a look and jerked my thumb at Sughrue's office. "The hell's he doing here?"

"I will be damned if I know." Rosey's got one of those big, rich, pear-shaped voices, and a body to match—the kind I been working on all my life but never could get just right. Always struck me funny, hearing him swear in that important-sounding voice. "He said he had paperwork to catch up. What do you think?"

"Whoever he's sleeping with sobered up and kicked him out, is my theory," I said. Sughrue always had a reputation for acting nasty, but he never had any trouble getting women. Just keeping them. "Where's he hang his pants lately, anyway?"

Turned out neither me nor Rosey knew who Sughrue was jumping with since his last divorce. But that didn't keep us from tossing ideas around, and that led to a lively discussion about who else might be sleeping with who else, and what with one thing and another, we went on for nearly half an hour. Which is how I came to be there when we got the call. And saw Rosey's face go from polite to serious to scared as he sat upright and started jotting stuff down on the pad.

"Hold on the line," he said finally, and keyed the mike to alert the guys who were probably damn near asleep in their cars by now. "Eighteen and Twenty-Seven." He pushed each word slow and distinct, even for him. "Code Fifty-two—that's Code Five-two—at Smokey's—that's Smokey's—Seventy-seven Village Street. See Bob Gates, standing by in front."

"Damn," I said. "A stiff at Smokey's." It looked like I was going to have to go out in all that weather and act busy; *double damn.* But I didn't know the worst of it yet.

"Wuzzit?" I asked. "Some wino fall asleep in the door?" Smokey's is in a part of town where that happens some, so maybe I wouldn't have to do much besides take pictures.

But my life just ain't that pretty. Rosey looked up at me with no look at all in his eyes and said, "It is Mr. Smollett, Jake. And Bob says he was shot."

That was worth a whistle, and I gave it one. If you believe some folks, Fred "Smokey" Smollett just ran a real busy bar at the edge of town, where we border up on the city. If you believe others, he ran

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

everything out of that bar that would run for money: games, women, drugs, and the occasional bit of stolen property. If you believe still other people, he paid *us* for the privilege.

Mind you, he never paid *me* anything. I never got that high up the ladder. Never even got high enough to know for certain he *was* paying off. But there was lots of talk, and it don't pay not to listen.

"Tell 'em just to hold the scene." If this was what it sounded like, I was going to have to get off my ass and do some detective work. But not much; once the brass learned who it was and what it was, they'd fall all over each other to get to Smokey's. "Call the lieutenant and see if we can get a real photographer out there. See if he'll let us call Dibbs." Dibbs wouldn't much like that after working all night, but he'd been to more evidence schools than me, so he was the man for an important job. And this was one. Talk was, Smollett had his hooks in some pretty major people here in the department, and that would include—

"What's up?" Sergeant Sughrue was leaning on the doorframe, still looking bad hungover but talking casual. Rosey told him and he nodded, still leaning, still talking casual. "Cancel those calls," he said. "Marley and me can take a look and see what has to be done before we go dragging everyone out on Christmas overtime." He turned to me. "Fetch the car, Jake; I'll get the kit." And he slouched off.

Rosey and I traded looks. We both of us knew I was a bad photographer and even worse handling evidence. Any other day of the year, there'd be brass hats enough around the place to make sure a job like this got handled by the best—or carefulest—we had. But this was Merry-dammit-Christmas, the brass was at home, and Sergeant Sughrue had just handed us a direct order. Rosey sure as hell wasn't going to cross him.

And me neither, I guess. I cursed the bones of old Kris Kringle and went out to get the car.

Traffic was light, and a good thing, too, because the streets were godawful. We saw just one snow plow on our way across town, slumping through the snow drifts like a whipped dog. The rest of the way, it was find the road and try to stay on it.

After a while, though, I got into the tracks made by the cruisers already on the scene ahead of us, and I figured this might be my chance. Now that I could drive with one hand, I reached out and got the radio mike.

"I'll just make sure Rosey called the lieutenant—"

That was as far as I got with it before Sughrue's big left hand jerked out and knocked the mike clean from my fingers.

That was a funny moment, right then. I mean, Sughrue had a temper, all right, and he was fast and mean and looked to be hungover bad, but hitting my hand like that was past the edge, even for him. I looked over—real quick because I had to pay attention to the road—

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and just for a second he was bent over, his face screwed up like he was mad as hell. Then his eyes opened up and locked on mine.

It couldn't have been more than a quarter of a second, that glance, because I had to look right back at the road, but it was long enough for something to pass between us. Something really ugly.

"I'll call him from Smokey's." Sughrue slumped back in the seat, his voice softer than I expected. I thought he was going to say more, and I think he thought so, too, but we were both quiet the rest of the way.

And that thing that passed between us, whatever it was, kept biting my butt.

I wasn't long figuring it out, either. It didn't take a real educated nose to smell the stink around this business pretty quick, and by the time we got to Smokey's, I'd pretty much put it together.

I saw it like this: Smollett, who probably has more dirt on the department in general and Sughrue in particular than was safe for anyone, gets shot dead. And it happens on Christmas, when the senior detectives and the brass hats are all at home with the kiddies. And here's Sughrue, he just comes tripping into work on Christmas morning looking like slime on a shingle and insisting him and me are going to investigate this all by ourselves— him that supposedly Smollett was paying off, and me . . .

Some folks say I became a cop because I'm too lazy to work and not smart enough to steal, but they're only half right. I could see this one coming down Main Street. And I was getting scared, because when Sughrue knocked that mike out of my hand and we looked at each other, I could tell he didn't *want* anyone at that crime scene who'd act like he gave a damn. And maybe in my eyes he saw I'd figured that out. And if he *did* see it, my life wasn't worth dryer lint, because Sughrue was that much faster and stronger and meaner than me that if he got worried about me giving him up, and decided to do something about it, I was damn sure to finish second.

That's what I was thinking when we walked into Smokey's that Christmas day, and it was pretty damn grim, if you ask me. Of course, Sughrue's dead now, and maybe I killed him, and I for sure didn't have it all figured out like I thought I did. But you can understand, maybe, why I was sweating like a crack-head when Sughrue told the uniforms at the scene to secure the area and take a statement from old Bob Gates, who used to sweep up the place, while he and I went into the office where Smollett was laying around dead.

It looked like the office of every bar everywhere. Maybe bigger than some, but with the same battered desk, cheap paneling, and old steel safe you see in all of them. Only here the safe hung open; a dead man sat behind the desk, white like the snow, leaning way back in his chair, with a raunchy cigar still clenched in his teeth; and there was blood all over.

And I mean, There Was Blood All Over; it was on the wall behind Smollett's body in big splash patterns, it was soaked into the carpet

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

under his chair, it was spritzed across the top of his desk, and it dribbled from his private toilet—a closet-sized deal off to one side—clear to the front of the desk.

"Let's check out the bathroom," Sughrue said, and I followed him quick. It wasn't quite as gross as the rest of the place, but there was plenty of blood on the floor by the sink, and like I said, the trail of drops to the front of the desk.

"This is where it started," Sughrue said when we'd looked around a little. "Smollett got shot here, went to his desk, tried to call for help, then fell back in his chair and bled to death. I'll call the coroner." He took a couple of slow steps back to the office and dialed the dead man's phone.

And if I had any doubts about the smell around this thing, I stopped having them right then. Because we never call the coroner till we're completely through gathering evidence. Last thing we want is those guys coming in with their jumpsuits and body bags, stepping all over everything. But here Sughrue calls them first thing.

I didn't say a word, though. No sense letting on I knew any more than he already thought I did. *Just stay quiet, act dumb, and maybe you'll get out of this better than Smollett did,* I told myself.

So I took pictures, knowing that no better than I am, and in this light, they'd be worthless. I got shots of Smollett in his chair, supposedly showing how he'd sat down, leaned back against the wall where his blood was spattered, and bled to death. I took pictures of the empty safe, thinking whoever shot him also took all the incriminating records *(that's how long ago this was; nowadays there'd be computer disks and backup files and all, but back then, if it wasn't on paper, it wasn't there, period),* and just as the guys from the coroner's came clomping in, I got pictures of the blood on Smollett's desk and the drips running from his toilet into the office. And like I say, I knew every damn one of them was worthless: The way I handled a camera, no one'd even recognize it was Smollett unless they saw the cigar stuck in his mouth, and the other shots would be too light or too dark, or just not pointed right to show which way the blood was splattered—

So maybe I'm not bright, after all. It took me all the while they were moving Smollett to figure out what that blood was telling me. And to tie it in with how Sughrue was sitting heavy in a spare seat off to one side while the coroner's boys made their haul. But by the time they left, I was almost curious about all this.

"You collect, Marley," Sughrue sighed. "I'll tag. Start in the toilet where it started, and work out to the desk."

The toilet where it started? Well, that was one theory. Of course, it wouldn't explain how so much of Smollett got splattered back against the wall behind his chair, or why there wasn't more of him spilled over the desk he supposedly leaned across. It wouldn't even account for why the blood drops on the carpet were *in front* of the desk, and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

trailed toward the toilet, not away from it. No, the only story that would explain all that was one where Smollett and whoever killed him got up in each other's face over his desk and one of them pulled a gun but didn't do it quick enough to keep the other one from shooting him. Or shooting him back.

But I had a feeling that wasn't how Sughrue wanted things to look, and they damn well weren't going to look like that when we left. Well, I sure as hell wasn't going to stick my foot in his story just now. I got down on my knees—not much fun for a guy of my build—and started scraping half-dried blood from the floor onto little sterile pieces of paper that went into little sterile envelopes for Sughrue to put labels on.

Sughrue didn't get up. Just sat there with his pen out and wrote down what part of the room each envelope came from before putting it carefully in the kit.

That's another thing shows how long ago this was: Nowadays you can get DNA identification from a blood smear and know whose it was and what he ate last Thursday. But back then, all you could get was blood type. So if Sughrue was fiddling with the envelopes like I thought he was, all the blood that got to the lab would be from behind the desk. The envelopes might *say* this sample or that sample was from the toilet or the front of the desk, but . . .

Then I thought of one other thing, and it almost got me killed right there. Which shows where thinking will get you. I was picking up blood from behind the desk, and when I got up I sort of routinely opened and closed the desk drawers. There was the usual clutter of coin wrappers, old receipts, and business cards, but "No gun," I said, and then kicked myself for saying it, because Sughrue turned to me real fast—fast like when he'd knocked the mike out of my fingers—and I couldn't see where his right hand was, which scared me so that I tried to cover.

"I mean" —I said it slow and dumb-like— "I was thinking there'd be one. Guess not, though; I never heard of him to pack." Fact is, you could look in a million back-room offices in bars like this and find a gun in every one of them. It's like bar owners think they're supposed to have one, or maybe they come with the liquor license or something. And considering Smollett's reputation, it was damn funny there *wasn't* one here. Maybe it was with the records gone from the safe. But I could see I wasn't going to get much older by saying that in front of Sughrue, so I just stood there looking stupid till he finally untensed and moved his hand out where I could see it empty.

"That's enough," he said. What with pictures and samples and the coroner's boys, we'd been there maybe two hours. "Let's get this to the station and ready for the lab." He got to his feet, slow, wincing a little.

So here I was with a guy who I thought had done the murder we were investigating, a guy who was also maybe roping me in as his accomplice, and who might just put me out of my misery if he thought

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I'd figured that out. And all I could think was, *I wonder how he plans to keep anyone else from looking over the scene and reading it right.* And I never did find that out.

Funny how your mind works. I mean, I should've been thinking a lot of other stuff, about Smollett and Sughrue, and if my guesses were right—about both of them—and whether Sughrue thought I was going along with whatever his plans were, and what ideas he might have about my future. But what I remember most was worrying about how he was going to keep everyone else from seeing what I saw in the back room there at Smokey's.

So this next part nobody believes. I must've told it a hundred times in the week after it happened and never got anything but funny looks, but it's true just like I'm going to say: We were walking out the back of Smokey's, to the car. And the snow hadn't let up a bit, but it'd been packed down by the uniforms standing around holding the scene for us. So as I followed Sughrue out the back door, onto the little landing there, I stepped onto that smooth-packed snow and my foot slid out from under me, and I lurched up to keep from falling and bumped into Sughrue, and he went down. Hard. Into the snow.

And he yelped.

Like I say, most folks don't think it happened that way. I could see on their faces when I got to that part, they all figured I pushed Sughrue on purpose. But it ain't so; I was there, I seen it, and it was pure luck, good or bad.

Anyway, Sughrue hit the snow and he yelped and laid there. After a second, I reached down to help him up, but he kind of half swung at me so I pulled back.

He rolled over then and got to his feet, but it wasn't like anything I ever saw before. You know how sometimes you get hurt and feel like you're moving in slow motion? Well, now I saw just that. Sughrue moving in slow motion. It was almost like he floated onto his side, holding his coat shut real tight, then got to his knees, then his feet, and I swear I wouldn't have been surprised if he drifted up into the falling snow and vanished in the gray clouds.

He might as well have.

We looked at each other again. We both knew now that he'd got shot last night, and I knew that the guy who'd done it just went to the morgue. And Sughrue knew I knew, and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it but walk back to the car with me.

And I mean to tell you, that ride back was weird. We had this thing between us now, and we both knew what it was, and neither one of us said a word all the way back to the station. I wasn't worried about Sughrue anymore, I wasn't even thinking what I should do about this sorry mess. I just kept trying to remember a word I read in a book once about something the Greeks call it, when fear turns to pity.

I never did think of that word. I don't think I had one other clear thought in my head all the time I fought the car through the snow-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and laying him on the cold, wet grass by the side of the car. He raced back inside to fetch the keys, lungs burning from the effort.

Hopkins was on his knees, gasping for breath.

"The keys!" Pinkerton screamed. "Now!"

Hopkins turned, eyes streaming, face puce, finger pointing desperately to his throat.

Pinkerton stared blankly back at the awful sight, totally confused. "The keys!" he demanded again, heart racing.

Hopkins tried to mouth the words, but the nut held fast in his windpipe. He staggered to his feet, pointing to the bowl.

And it dawned on Pinkerton. He almost smiled. "Choke on it, you bastard!" he said, rifling through the dying man's pockets for Fines's car keys. "Your test, remember. Your rules."

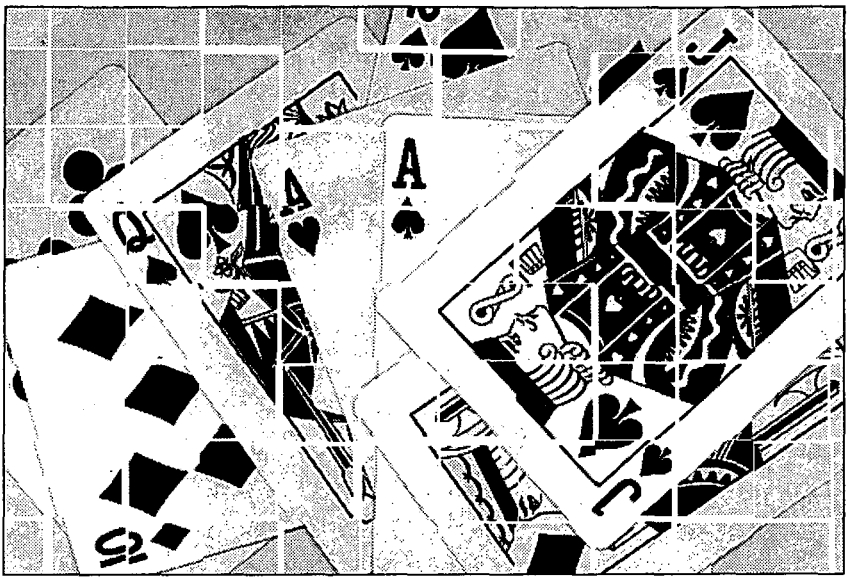
Hopkins's bulging eyes made one last appeal for mercy, no sound coming from his blueing lips.

Pinkerton held the car keys in his hand. "I'd say this was a moral decision, Ben. Two lives to save, only one pair of hands." He turned and headed for the door, stopping one last time. "When you first came here, you said you wanted answers. Would I save the life of the man I despised most in the world?" He held the car keys aloft. "See these? I'm taking Fines to hospital. Hopefully, it's not too late. And I hope that answers your question, Ben, I really do."

The last sound Hopkins heard was the cottage door closing. ●

"He was right—he did his time standing on his head."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



THE TRIPLE SCORE

by Terence Faherty

1.

It was seven hours into an eight-hour shift. My back hurt from standing. My eyes burned from cigarette smoke. The vibration from the blenders I was using to grind ice had loosened the fillings in my teeth. Or maybe having to grind so much ice was causing me to grind my teeth as well. I'd made so many margaritas that morning I was developing an accent. The salt was raising my blood pressure. I was in danger of contracting lime disease. Take your pick.

When the lady in the ancient fur-collared coat sat down and ordered a sweet manhattan, I was grateful for the change of pace. And for having a real, live customer for once. Most of my customers were out on the casino floor, starting the new year off the way they'd ended the old year, by giving their money away. They sent their orders in to me via waitresses who all seemed to be pushing tequila and fruit juice, frozen.

I'd seen the manhattan lady before, but I couldn't place her, which piqued my curiosity. Not that it ever needed much piquing. The lady herself provided more than enough. She was past sixty, but how far

©1998 by Terence Faherty

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

past was anybody's guess. Her thin hair was dyed a reddish brown, almost the same color as the spots on the backs of her large hands. Her friendly eyes—also large—had blue irises that were clouded slightly. She had a broad, flat nose, and there were spaces between her very white teeth.

She was alone, particularly alone, which wasn't that unusual in a casino on New Year's Day. It didn't seem right for her, though, and that impression helped me place her about the time I was delivering her second drink.

She was a former customer of mine, someone who'd been in the bar the previous Thanksgiving Day, when I'd been working the same holiday shift as a favor to the bartenders who had families. The woman had sat on the same stool, wearing the same coat and the same expression: wistful sadness.

When I said, "Hello, again," to show that I remembered her, she took up our previous conversation as though we'd last spoken the day before.

"I've found a new one," she said.

"A new what?" I asked.

"Family," she said. "You remember. I told you I'd lost my family the last time we spoke."

I did remember. She'd been looking around the casino expectantly that day, searching the crowd. I'd asked her if she'd lost something. It had been a silly question, even for me, a casino being a place where most people lose things. She'd answered me patiently and politely, telling me she'd lost her family. Just that. No explanation. No tears, either, which the holidays and sweet manhattans often produce. She'd just said it and left.

Now she was back. "A family is very important, you know," she said. "Do you mind if I ask your name?"

"It's Owen," I said. "Owen Keane."

"How nice. My name is Ethel Peters. Mrs. Frank Peters. My late husband never went by Francis, only Frank.

"As I was saying, Owen, a family is important. It keeps you looking outward. Do you know what I mean? The great danger is looking inward too much. If you're alone, that is. Are you married, Owen?"

"No," I said.

Terence Faherty's fiction-writing career began in 1990 when an unagented query to St. Martin's Press drew the attention of one of the company's editors. Mr. Faherty's debut book featured series character Owen Keane, the protagonist of "Triple Score." The Keane series proved so successful that the Indianapolis author was soon able to devote himself full-time to writing, and he now has a second series running with Simon & Schuster. ¶

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You have a girlfriend, though. I thought so. Then you know what I'm trying to say. I'm sure she keeps you looking outward."

Actually, she kept me looking dazed, but we weren't there to discuss my problems.

Ethel checked her watch and then pushed her empty glass across to me. "Perhaps one more," she said.

I brought her another drink, a double if you went by maraschino syrup. She sipped it and nodded her head appreciatively. "If you look inward too much, you can get swallowed up by your problems and fears. There's no future in that."

I agreed that there wasn't.

"When Frank was alive and the kids were at home, I never had two minutes back to back for sinking into my own problems. Everyone was drawing me out of myself all the time. 'Look over here! Watch this! Help me! Listen to me!'"

Ethel gave every command a different voice, which made me smile. Her own smile dimmed a little with each impersonation. She looked at the empty stools on either side of her and blinked.

"Tell me about your new family," I said.

"It's not a real family," she said, smiling again. "Not a traditional one, I mean. It's the kind you see on television nowadays, where people band together with friends and coworkers and organize their own families because they don't have the old-fashioned kind. You know the shows I mean, like the one that's set in the bar where everybody knows everyone else. Being in your bar makes me think of that show."

I was lucky if I knew the waitresses in my bar on any given shift, but I nodded encouragingly.

"My new family is like that," Ethel said. "People of all backgrounds and ages. From all faiths, too, although we've put those differences behind us. We meet in a church, but we're not a religion. We're more of a spiritual community, but we don't discuss beliefs. We find that tolerance is so much easier if no one actually mentions their beliefs. We talk instead about the things that worry us and frighten us. Listening to other people's problems gets you looking outward in a hurry."

I'd found that to be true enough, at least at first. It had been my experience, though, that other people's troubles had a way of becoming my own.

I wanted to hear more about Ethel's spiritual community, but when she checked her watch for a third time, she reached for her shoulder bag. From it she took a purse and from that a hundred dollar bill. She handed the bill to me, but kept on searching.

"I thought I had something smaller," she said.

The C-note was new, but it had already been disfigured. To the right of Franklin's portrait, someone had written "Happy Birthday" in lavender ink.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Here we go," Ethel said, pulling a twenty from the bottom of the purse. "Trade you."

I gave her back the hundred and took the twenty to the register to get her change. She was applying a fresh coat of red lipstick when I got back and didn't glance up from her mirror.

When I passed her spot at the bar again, she was gone. She'd left a single dollar behind. It was also a new bill, but it didn't say "Happy Birthday" or "Happy New Year" or anything else.

2.

When my shift ended, I made my way out through the casino itself, using it as a shortcut to the boardwalk. I disguised myself by buttoning up my trench coat and cinching it at the waist. Only my black pants and shoes, the white collar of my uniform shirt, and my black bow tie showed, which made it possible for me to pass as a New Year's Eve reveler still wearing his tuxedo. Or so I hoped, as I had no desire to field drink orders. It would certainly have helped the disguise if all the buttons on my trench coat had matched.

The main casino wasn't as crowded as I'd expected. The gamblers were changing shifts, too, I decided. The all-nighters were starting to filter out, and the day shift was just coming in. I passed row after glittering row of slot machines, at least half of them idle. By noon there wouldn't be a vacant seat. A high roller had drawn a crowd at one of the crap tables. He drew me, too, for as long as it took him to miss his point. Then I wandered on, past roulette wheels and blackjack tables, most of them doing modest business.

One blackjack table was doing a little better. The dealer was someone I knew, a young woman named Theresa Rendeja. She'd been a member of my employee orientation class when I'd hired on at the casino. Theresa was a dark-haired, pretty girl, but what had stuck with me most about her was her extreme shyness. I'd wondered how she would do at a job that required so much human and very-nearly-human interaction.

When I paused to watch her table, it wasn't to evaluate how Theresa was handling her shyness. It was because the last empty spot at the table had been taken by a woman in an ancient cloth coat with a fur collar. I circled around behind Theresa to make sure that the newcomer was really Ethel Peters. I ended up in a knot of people who were gathered around a big-six wheel that stood behind the blackjack table. Beyond the wheel and just to the left of Theresa's slender back was the woman who had been drinking in my bar an hour earlier. Everything about her was the same except her expression. Her wistful sadness had been replaced by icy concentration.

The other players at the table, one other woman and three men, watched with the same intensity as Theresa prepared to "wash the cards." In striking contrast were the attitudes of two men who flanked the table. Both ignored Theresa as she spread five blue-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

backed card decks out facedown for the initial shuffle, the chemmy shuffle, the process of scattering and then gathering up the cards.

I followed the gaze of the man standing to the left of the table, a short, heavyset man with a toupee that had surely come from the Graceland souvenir shop. He was looking in the direction of one of the security teams that patrolled the casino floor. I checked the man on the right, a taller man in a cowboy hat. He seemed to be watching the pit boss of the blackjack area, who was standing a few tables away. The cowboy was doing more than watching the pit boss, I realized. He was keeping himself between the woman and Theresa's table, blocking the boss's view.

Something was going to happen at Theresa's table. The flanking men were lookouts, working with one of the players. I wanted to step forward and warn Theresa, but I knew if I did, nothing would happen. The lookouts would just walk away. The confederate would never reveal himself, and I would never get to see his play. So I hesitated, fatally.

Theresa finished the chemmy shuffle and divided the cards into five piles of roughly equal height. She performed an expert riffle shuffle on each pile and then stacked them all together. Then she produced a single yellow card, which she pushed across the table to Ethel. It was the cut card, the card a player would insert into the giant deck to indicate to the dealer where the stacked cards should be cut. Once they were cut and in the shoe, the game could begin.

Ethel's hands were at her sides, below the level of the table. She raised her right hand and extended it across the table. She didn't pick up the cut card. She couldn't have. Her large hand already held a stack of cards equal in height to the ones Theresa had shuffled. She placed the blue stack next to Theresa's waiting shoe. Then she took the shuffled deck and dropped it into her shoulder bag. Her movements were quick and sure, so quick that she'd finished before I'd made sense of what I'd seen.

I'd identified the confederate at the table. It was the sweet old lady who had rattled on to me about her families, old and new. But that wasn't the news flash that froze me in place. Theresa had stood there and watched while the decks were switched. Theresa was in on it, too.

She was slipping the loaded deck into her shoe as I stared on.

Before she finished, Ethel turned and left the table. One of the lookouts, the short, fat Elvis, was also melting into the crowd. The cowboy had already gone. As I stood fixed to the floor, Ethel's place at the table was taken by a man in aviator's sunglasses and a matching leather jacket. His arrival seemed to signal the start of play. I watched Theresa deal the first card to prove to myself that she'd really go through with it. Then I took off after Ethel.

I'd given her a healthy head start, but I didn't think I'd have any problem catching her. I'd forgotten that little old ladies make up a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

significant percentage of the traffic in a Jersey casino. I spotted false Ethels all the way to the boardwalk but never the real one. On my way back to Theresa's table, I checked the bars and scanned the rows of slot machines and never saw the right fur-collared coat.

At the table I joined a small group of gawkers who were whispering about the play of the man in the aviator glasses. The flyer's pile of chips had more than doubled in the time I'd been gone. As I watched, he doubled it again, standing pat with hands of seventeen, sixteen, and eighteen and forcing Theresa to break three times in succession.

Theresa was playing strictly according to her dealer training. There was no reason for her to cheat now. The stacked deck ensured that her bad luck would be as odds-defying as the flyer's good luck. The blackjack pit boss came up beside me to watch the play. Watching was all she could do as the house lost hand after hand. One word from me, though, and the game would be over. I watched Theresa, her dark eyes almost black against her pale skin, and said nothing.

3.

I had the next day off, my reward for working the holiday, but I drove down to the casino just the same. When I got there, I rode the employee elevator up into the casino offices and called on a friend in the security department.

Robert Guineri wasn't really a friend. He was a customer, like Ethel Peters, a dry martini drinker who admired the way I could wave a vermouth bottle over a shaker of gin without actually pouring any in. We'd discovered a shared interest, crime, and he'd invited me more than once to visit his office to watch his collection of casino surveillance tapes.

Guineri was a generously laid out man who liked to dress in comfortable clothes woven in man-made fibers, materials that would outlast his arteries by a generation, as he liked to joke. I found him seated in his small cubicle with a green-barred computer printout spread on the desk before him. He was leaning over it, one hand supporting his head and the other shielding his eyes from the glare of the fluorescent lights in the ceiling.

I tapped on the frame of his open door, and the way he started told me he'd been asleep.

"Lay off that banging, damn you," he said when he'd settled himself. He peered at me through his thick glasses, whose black plastic frames were as fashionable as his suit.

"Oh, it's you," he said. "Owen Keane, student of crime. This is a coincidence. I was just thinking of stepping down to your office to get a little pick-me-up. You don't happen to have something medicinal on you, by any chance?"

"You're thinking of a St. Bernard," I said. "I'm just a bartender. Enjoy the holiday?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I blew past enjoyment the night before last. Kept on going, too, right through exhilaration, higher consciousness, and, finally, unconsciousness. What can I do for you?"

I told him I'd come to see the tapes he'd mentioned, the ones that showed con artists at work.

"There's an idea. I've been trying to think of something painless I could do that would pass for work. Pull up a chair while I find a tape. If my boss should stop by, you're a visiting auditor from the Cayman Islands, come to study at the feet of the master. Lucky for us, you dress like an auditor."

"Thanks," I said, although "touché" would also have worked.

There was a small television on the credenza behind Guineri's desk. It had an even smaller VCR built into its base. He selected a tape from a shelf full of tapes and popped it into the machine. The title "Casino Fraud" appeared on the screen.

Guineri settled back in his chair. "I use this in a lecture I give at our conventions. Legalized gambling is spreading so quickly, there's a real training gap in the security field. These clips are from casinos here in Atlantic City and in Vegas. We start off with slot machine tampering."

We started with slots and stayed with them for a long time. I watched what seemed like an hour of fuzzy, black-and-white video of slot machines being drilled, poked, and even dismantled. The video was enlivened by Guineri's running commentary.

"See that? He stuck a magnet on the side of the machine. His partner was supposed to be blocking the view, but the camera picked it up. These guys often work with partners who do double duty as lookouts and screens."

I sat and watched and asked a question once in a while. The next segment of the tape featured dealers and croupiers palming chips.

"Their hands are never supposed to be out of sight," Guineri said. "A dealer isn't supposed to reach for a Kleenex or scratch himself without first flashing his open hands to the camera to show that they're empty. Watch this guy. He's palmed a chip. Now he's going to hitch up his pants. Did you see it? He stuck the chip in his waistband."

Guineri patted his stomach. "If I were to turn this waist of mine to crime, what a career I could have."

Several of the clips ended with security teams showing up to lead crooked employees away. "Got you," Guineri said after one of these mini dramas. "Go directly to jail, baby. I love to see these goombahs go down."

I didn't feel like celebrating. I'd just about given up hope that I'd learn something useful. Then the picture switched to an overhead view of a blackjack table. None of the foreshortened figures around the table was recognizable, but their arrangement was very familiar. I'd seen the same grouping at Theresa's table the day before.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Here's something special," Guineri said. "Everyone you see in this shot is in on it, dealer, players, and the two screens. They're going to substitute a shoeload of cards. The lookouts have a signal for all clear. I think it's when they have their arms crossed. Yeah. See? Here comes the switch. The bald guy's going to do it. The new deck—we call it a 'cooler'—comes out of his pocket; the old deck goes into his pocket. Bang. Now chrome-dome hustles the legit deck out of the casino. That's one of the beauty parts of this scam. By the time play starts, all the evidence is gone. The lookouts step away. New players—also bad guys—step in, and the casino gets reamed."

"What about the camera?" I asked. "They didn't even try to block the view of the camera."

"They couldn't. So they took their chances. The real pros know that it isn't much of a risk. It's impossible for the people monitoring the cameras to see everything at once. Hell, the cameras don't even see everything. We try to convince our employees that they do, but it's a bluff."

"How is it the camera caught those guys? Luck?"

"No, a tip. The security people got word that a scam was going to go down. They knew the dealer involved, so they had a camera zeroed in on his table. None of those grifters made it out of the casino."

"Who were they?"

Guineri shrugged. "Small-timers. A group of no-names who came together for this one play. Gypsies, some of them, which is our slang for bad guys who travel around from casino to casino. A couple were probably local talent. That tape was shot in Vegas, where there's no shortage of indigenous grifters. A local connection is important. You've got to convince a dealer to go along, which generally takes some time and some smoozing. Sometimes all it takes is a wad of money. Human nature sucks, Owen."

"Where do they get the cards?"

"That's the real challenge. As you may know, our security department keeps logs of the number of new decks distributed to each table and the used decks turned back in. The numbers have to match. And the number of used decks has to match the number of decks destroyed. We drill holes through our old decks. Sometimes a security guy will go bad and finagle with the logs so he can slip out enough decks to sell. The other potential source is the company out in Nevada that prints the cards. They're supposed to have their own controls, but from what I hear, their system is looser than a goose's bowels.

"It's an evil world, Owen. Take it from a professional. Our work is founded on the premise that the average person is a crime waiting to happen. I wish I could say it's a false assumption."

"So do I," I said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

4.

Theresa was that rare thing, a casino worker who actually lived in Atlantic City. Most weren't making enough money to live there, or they were making too much. Atlantic City's housing falls into two categories, the luxurious and the leaning. Theresa's apartment building, the Bell Street Arms, was leaning, but only slightly. It stood across the street from a public-housing project, buildings that were much newer but in no better shape. The project was alive, though, with human sound: music, babies, voices, laughter. The Bell Street Arms was dead in comparison.

I'd actually been to Theresa's apartment before, for the going-away party of a mutual friend, another casino bartender named Donna. The lost Donna was the basis of my approach to Theresa. When she answered my call on the tinny front-door intercom, I gave my name and told her I'd come to ask for news of our friend.

Theresa said, "Sure," and buzzed me in.

Her apartment was on the second floor. By the time I'd climbed the flight of stairs, I'd amended my master plan. I'd offer to buy Theresa a cup of coffee at a diner I'd spotted when I'd parked my car. That might sound better to her than letting a man she barely knew into her apartment.

When Theresa opened the door—without first setting the security chain—I made the suggestion.

She looked backward over her shoulder. "That would be nice, Owen. The thing is, I'm waiting for a phone call. You come in, and I'll make you a cup of coffee."

The little apartment was as neat as I remembered, and as light on furniture. The living room—a sofa, throw pillows, and a standing lamp—opened directly onto a dining area that opened directly onto the kitchen. The dining room was furnished with a card table and four chairs. There was a game board set up on the table, a Scrabble board. On opposing sides of the board stood two little wooden racks holding lettered tiles. Several words had been laid out, crossword style, on the board.

"The game break up early last night?" I asked.

Theresa looked over from the sink where she was filling a kettle. "No. I was just practicing this morning to pass the time."

"I've never heard of anyone practicing Scrabble," I said.

Theresa smiled. It might have been her first of the day. "You've probably never heard of Scrabble tournaments, either," she said. "Or Scrabble clubs."

I had to own up.

"I've never played in a real tournament," Theresa said, "but I belong to a club here in town. We play our own little tournament every week. It's fun."

"A little slower than blackjack," I said.

"Yes," Theresa said, and her smile faded away.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She changed the subject on me, telling me all the news about Donna, which was that she'd abandoned bartending for barber college. Stylist school, Theresa called it.

"She says she already has the hard part down, which is being a good listener. Do you ever get tired of listening to other people's troubles, Owen?"

I said I didn't, but I must not have sounded sincere, because Theresa didn't take advantage of the implicit offer.

She'd finished making the coffee by then. We sat down at the card table, using the chairs that had the racks of Scrabble pieces in front of them. Theresa had run out of Donna stories and didn't have much else to say. I had plenty to say, but I couldn't bring myself to blurt it out. I spotted a framed portrait on a shelf behind Theresa's head. Given their proximity, the resemblance between the woman and the young man in the photograph was impossible to miss.

"Your brother?" I asked.

"Yes," Theresa said, looking not at the portrait but at the kitchen phone. "He lives in Pleasantville, across the bay. He goes to college. He's studying to be an artist."

"I have a friend who paints," I said.

"It's very hard work," Theresa said. "But it's very important work, too."

"Yes," I said.

"Not like what I do. I'm very proud of Raul."

She drained the hot liquid from her cup in a series of determined gulps. It was the signal for me to drink up and go.

To extend my stay, I asked, "How do you play two racks of tiles at once? Doesn't knowing what's in the second rack influence your play?"

"I don't know all the tiles in the other rack," Theresa said, relaxing a little. "In a normal game, you draw new tiles as soon as you've made a play. When you're practicing, you wait to draw the tiles until after you've played from the other rack."

When she'd finished explaining, she pretended to drink from her empty cup by way of handing me my hat. I took a long, slow drink of coffee and said, "Is there anything the matter, Theresa?"

"No," she said, as pale now as yesterday. "What makes you ask that?"

"I was in the casino yesterday after my shift. I saw you at your table." The dark eyes nailed me and I faltered. "You looked . . . wrung out."

"It's the holidays, Owen. Everybody looks tired after the holidays."

"So there's nothing wrong? Nothing I can help you with?"

Theresa stared at me for a long time. "You can help me finish this game," she finally said. "I'm tired of playing alone."

I said okay. I had visions of laying out some word on the board that would unlock her secret. "Bunko," maybe, or "confess." But coming

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

up with the right word at the right time had never been a talent of mine. I couldn't even make small talk with Theresa while the game was on. She played with the concentration of a chess master, answering my questions with a single word when she answered at all.

The last word she played cleared all seven tiles from her rack. "Bingo," she said. "I made bingo, Owen. That's what we call it when you use seven tiles on your last play. I've never done it before. And it's a triple word score. Wow. I'm so glad there was someone here to see it."

I was glad, too, her joy making me forget my errand for a moment. Then I looked down at the word she'd grafted onto "hare," my previous play. She'd used my H and her seven letters to spell out "hopeless."

5.

When I left Theresa's apartment, I thought I'd finished with her mystery. I wouldn't force a confession out of her; there'd be no point in that. And I'd never turn her in. The casino owners' loss meant even less to me than it did to their bottom line.

I went to work at my normal time the next day, driving down from Mystic Island in a steady rain that was just on the friendly side of sleet. The rain had made a ghost town of the boardwalk and its shops and brought the gulls up from the beach. I scattered noisy groups of them as I made my solitary passage.

The crowd inside the casino was small, which I understood, given the weather. The employees I passed on my way in were unsmiling and distracted, which I didn't understand. In the lounge next to the employee locker room, two women were crying, one of them uncontrollably. The other, a waitress I knew named Chastine, sobbed at a more measured pace. It occurred to me that she was only crying to keep the first woman company.

"Keane," Chastine said. "Have you heard? Theresa Rendeja was killed. Murdered."

I sat down in a red plush chair, wet trench coat and all. Chastine nodded as though I'd spoken. "I know," she said. "None of us can believe it either. Everybody liked Theresa. She was quiet but sweet. Real sweet."

That sketch was vivid enough to provoke renewed crying from the other woman. I asked, "When?"

"Last night sometime. One of her neighbors heard the noise and called the cops. That's all we know."

I pictured Theresa as I'd last seen her, distracted even during our goodbyes by the possibility the phone would ring. "I wonder if her brother knows," I said.

"Raul," Chastine said and put a hand to her mouth. "He'll be

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

totalled. They were really close. Theresa was putting him through school. Did you know that?"

I shook my head.

"She was so proud of him. He's a writer. Gonna be a writer."

"A writer?" I asked.

"A book writer," Chastine said.

"An author," the other woman corrected between sobs.

"Marla in personnel will know Raul's phone number," Chastine said. "I'll go ask her."

"Me, too," the crying woman said.

As they left, Chastine handed me a copy of the morning *Post*, folded down to the size of a paperback. The story on Theresa was smaller still. It was little more than a bulletin rushed into the early edition, and it didn't tell me any more than the sobbing waitresses had, not even how Theresa had been killed. I was grateful for that omission.

6.

I hung my coat in my locker and went out to my station. The bar was already busy, but not busy enough to keep Theresa out of my mind. If there was a connection between what I'd seen her do at the blackjack table and her murder, then what I'd done about what I'd seen—nothing—was also connected to her death. I'd had the chance to step between the cause and effect of Theresa's end, and I hadn't taken it. No amount of measuring and mixing could pull my mind off that.

I was so busy working myself over that I didn't notice Robert Guineri until he was settling himself on his stool. The security man was wearing the same gray polyester suit he'd been sleeping in the day before, but he'd dressed it up with a hot-pink shirt and tie.

"A martini, Owen," he said. "Rocks. Extra, extra dry."

"Should you be drinking during business hours?" I asked.

"I've got that all worked out," Guineri said. "If anybody pimps me about it, I'm going to say that I bought the drink as a cover, that I was really down in the bar quizzing a suspect."

"Who?" I asked, filling the empty spaces in a glass of ice with gin.

"You."

I checked the filling a little past the rim of the glass. "Of what am I suspected?"

Guineri grunted. "Tight-assed grammar. You're also suspected of being involved in a murder. And don't ask by whom. By me."

I managed to skewer two olives with a single pass of a plastic rapier. I dropped the victims into the glass and blotted up the displaced gin with my bar towel. "Sounds like you've already interviewed several bartenders this morning."

Guineri grabbed the drink and grunted again. "Don't I wish. I've been on the phone with a policeman friend of mine. He's on the county's Major Crimes Unit. Knew all about the Rendeja killing."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Why did he call you?"

"I called him. It was after I did a little checking up on Rendeja, which was after I read the *Post* story about her. That story made me want to know if there was anything unusual about her from a humble security man's point of view. Turns out her table got burned big on New Year's Day."

"That happens," I said.

"Yes, it does. But the dealer involved doesn't often end up beaten to death."

Beaten to death, I repeated to myself. I said, "Coincidence?"

"I hate coincidences. Here's one that really bugs me. The morning after Rendeja's big loss, you showed up in my office to watch the tape on casino fraud I offered to show you months ago. You were only politely interested until we got to the section on blackjack fraud. Then you sat up and took notice."

"It was the camera work," I said.

Guineri studied me. His thick glasses, behind which his eyes were pale blurs, should have made it a painless procedure. Instead, I felt I was being magnified, that every hair on my guilty head was standing out like a tree trunk.

"My friend the cop told me something interesting," Guineri said. "The murder was reported by Rendeja's downstairs neighbor. The neighbor is a busybody. He saw a man enter the building yesterday evening, a man in leather with a shaved head. He took special notice of this stranger because he couldn't remember hearing anybody buzz him in.

"A little while later, the busybody saw Rendeja enter the building. That got his attention, too, because Rendeja usually stayed out late on Tuesday evenings. Then he heard the sounds of a fight and called the police. They got there too late."

Guineri tried to lean his bulk over the bar. "Now for the interesting part. The nosy neighbor remembered another visitor from earlier in the day, a guy he was pretty sure ended up in Rendeja's apartment. He was a thin guy in an old trench coat. Had a hangdog expression on his face, the neighbor said, like a pallbearer at his own funeral. Sound like anybody we know?"

I was spared the job of lying by my supervisor, Manny. He yelled my name from the other side of the bar, where unhappy waitresses were stacking up like planes over a foggy airport.

Guineri hauled himself off his stool. "I'm going up to study the surveillance tapes from New Year's Day," he said. "If I see any interesting camera work, I'll send for you."

7.

As soon as the bar traffic thinned, I told Manny I was going home sick. He didn't like it, and I didn't care. I didn't think much of my chances of collecting a casino pension. Not if Guineri spotted me

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

standing near Theresa's table in the surveillance video. Just staying out of jail might be a challenge then.

On my way out of the casino, I tracked down Chastine, the waitress friend of Theresa's. I asked her if she'd managed to get Raul Rendeja's phone number.

"No," she said. "Personnel didn't have it. They didn't have a number for any of Theresa's family. That's so sad."

"I just heard something else," I said. "Theresa wasn't supposed to be home last night. Was she scheduled to work?"

"Not that I know of," Chastine said. "If she left work early, the gossips around here would know about it."

I tried to remember the rest of the gossip Guineri had passed on. "What I heard was, she was usually out on Tuesday nights."

"Oh," Chastine said. "I bet it was that club she belonged to."

"The Scrabble club?"

"Yeah. I couldn't remember the name of the game they play—Scrabble. Theresa was really into that club. I think it was the people she liked the most, being around the people. Her not having much family, you can understand that. Something like a club gets to be family."

I almost said "bingo," but that echo of Theresa caught in my throat. Chastine had given me the connection I should have made in Theresa's apartment. "Do you know where the club meets?" I asked.

"No. Except that it was a place you wouldn't expect. What was it now?"

"A church?"

"Yeah, a church. That's right. But I don't know which church, except that it's somewhere here on the island."

8.

I traded some bills for quarters at one of the change stations near the slot machines. Then I went out onto the rain-swept boardwalk to a phone booth that had had an intact directory the last time I checked.

The book was still there. First I looked for a name I'd been given in the bar on New Year's Day: Ethel Peters. I didn't find it. There was no listing for a Scrabble club either. I called a game store in the Pleasantville Mall and asked the kid who answered about Scrabble clubs. He asked me if I didn't mean Dungeons and Dragons clubs and laughed.

That left Plan C, which was calling every church in the phone book. Midway through the list, I spoke with the Reverend Hubert Miller of Sunrise United Methodist Church on Indiana Avenue.

"Yes," Reverend Miller said in response to my standard question. "We're the Scrabble church. The club meets on Tuesday nights in our basement."

I asked for the name of the club president or secretary.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I guess they're both me. I don't just provide space for the club. I actually got it going."

I asked him to stay put and then drove over to Indiana Avenue. If it hadn't been for the rain, I would have run; the church was that close.

Sunrise United Methodist was bigger than I'd pictured. It was a stone building with a crenelated tower in place of a steeple. The big black double doors at the top of its stone steps were locked. I found an open door, also black, on the side of the church and down a flight. Next to the door was a glass-enclosed bulletin board. It contained fliers for a number of meetings: a divorced parents support group, a retirement planning seminar, a gamblers anonymous chapter, and even a worship service of sorts. It was a winter solstice service, which was to feature "communal free movement with percussion."

Hubert Miller was seated in a small office just inside the door. It was a tiny office, given the size of his church. He had a brown beard, sandy hair, and a beak of a nose still red from the outside air. The half of him that showed above the desk was wearing a cable knit sweater. A dripping yellow rain jacket was draped across the room's only visitor chair.

"Throw it over here," Miller said of the jacket. "You the Scrabble guy?"

The scrabbled guy, I thought, but I didn't feel up to making even that pale joke. Miller, in contrast, was in a great mood.

"It's a very underrated game," he said. "I think of it as full-contact crosswords, but there's a contemplative, strategic side to it, too. It's like chess for right-brained people."

He couldn't have heard the news about Theresa Rendeja. Even if he'd only known her casually, knowing she was dead would have damped him down considerably. The secret of his happy ignorance lay on the desktop, the new home of the yellow rain slicker. Sticking out from beneath the jacket was today's *Atlantic City Post,* still in the plastic sleeve some thoughtful paperboy had used to keep it dry.

To test my deduction, I said, "A friend of mine, Theresa Rendeja, told me about the club."

"Ah yes, Theresa. She's come along quite a bit as a player. And as a member of the group. She's still too dark and quiet, but she's made progress."

"Do you award points for socializing?"

"Not in our little tournaments. But I keep a running tally in my head. I'm not here to promote a particular board game, after all. My job is to help people, even if all I can do for them is get them away from their worries one night a week."

"I noticed the fliers posted by the door," I said.

"They're not half of what we're into. Anything to keep the franchise open, that's my motto. Like most shore churches, Sunrise never had that big a year-round congregation. It was designed to accommodate

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the summer crowds. That was seventy years ago. Nowadays most tourists are worshiping at those chrome-and-glass cathedrals along the boardwalk. So I do what I can to keep the facility in use."

Miller was a man who could talk and observe at the same time. "You're not really interested in Scrabble, are you?" he said.

"No," I said. "I'm interested in information. I need the name and address of a woman Theresa met through your club. The woman is about sixty, with thinning red hair. She's used the name Ethel Peters, but it's probably an alias."

"What's this all about? Why don't you ask Theresa about this woman? You're not some possessive boyfriend, are you? You're not jealous of a casual friendship Theresa made? Is that what's been bothering her lately? Have you been giving her grief about belonging to a silly club?"

"I'm not Theresa's boyfriend. We worked at the same casino. Theresa took part in a plan to rip the casino off. I think the woman she met in your club got her involved in it."

"That's impossible. Theresa? Wait a minute. You said she worked at the casino. Did she get canned? Is that why she was so down last night?"

"No," I said. "Why did she leave here early?"

"She was upset about something. And Ethel didn't show up last night." Miller paused to recollect. "That's what Theresa was waiting for. I couldn't put my finger on it last night. She was waiting for Ethel."

"Ethel Peters?"

"That's not the last name she gave me. Did Ethel take part in this scam?"

"Yes," I said.

"God help her. She was part of our gamblers anonymous group, too. That's why she first came to Sunrise. I thought she was doing well."

"What's her last name?"

"How are you involved? If what you've told me is true, isn't it a job for the fraud squad?"

"No," I said, "the homicide squad."

I extracted Miller's *Post* from beneath his jacket and then from its plastic wrapper. I laid it flat on the desk and pointed to the little story on the bottom of page one. Miller read it in the time it took him to bow his head and raise it again.

"I think Theresa's murder may have something to do with the casino rip-off," I said. "I think Ethel knows the connection."

"Shouldn't you be telling that to the police?" Miller asked.

"You tell them, after you've given me Ethel's name."

"It's Taylor. She lives in Brigantine."

❖ ❖ ❖

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

9.

Brigantine occupied the barrier island north of Atlantic City. It was serviced by a single causeway near Atlantic City's marina district, a setup that created constant traffic jams but gave Brigantine a sense of isolation few Jersey shore towns possessed.

Traffic wasn't a problem on this particular rainy January morning. I drove north on Brigantine Boulevard with marshland on my left and slightly drier beach property on my right. Thanks to its proximity to Atlantic City, Brigantine had always been less a resort than a bedroom community, a quality that had only been intensified by legalized gambling. That morning, Brigantine reminded me of Hamilton, one of the prosperous neighbors of my hometown, Trenton: streets of little homes, Italian restaurants, and Catholic churches somehow lifted bodily from suburbia and set down on the edge of the dunes.

The address Hubert Miller had given me was in a block of nearly identical bayside homes called Mulliner Street. The buildings reminded me of the little plastic houses from a monopoly set, jammed into a long row in anticipation of a trade up to a plastic hotel. Some kind of trade was long overdue for most of the houses on Mulliner Street. They had a deserted, defeated look that was the temporary effect of the ugly day magnifying the permanent problem of an undignified old age.

Ethel Taylor's house had at least been painted recently. Its board-and-batten siding was a sage green that stood out dramatically among all the weathered, peeling white. Ethel answered her door so promptly that I thought for a second the Reverend Miller had called to warn her of my visit. I tossed that deduction on the ash heap when Ethel failed to recognize me. Whoever she was expecting, it wasn't her favorite bartender.

"Yes?" she said, blinking at the gray, wet day. Her head was bobbing slightly as though she were on the verge of sleep, falling forward slowly and then jerking back.

I told her my name. I added the name of my casino to prod her memory. "We spoke on New Year's Day."

"New Year's Day?" Ethel repeated warily. This time I got a whiff of bourbon.

"I've come to talk to you about Theresa Rendeja."

Ethel asked, "Who?" Then her rheumy eyes betrayed her, spilling tears that ran down her immobile face. She reached up to touch them and then said, "You'd better come in."

The darkly papered front room overflowed with furniture, but it didn't look like Ethel's furniture. It was new and cheap, a sofa, a love seat, and chairs with imitation wood frames and gaudy, removable cushions that looked tightly stuffed but turned out to be largely filled with air. Between Ethel's sofa and my chair was a coffee table made of the same thinly disguised pressboard. On it was an empty juice

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

glass and a bottle of Maker's Mark. There wasn't a maraschino cherry in sight.

As she sat down, Ethel filled the glass. Before the sofa had stopped squeaking, she'd drunk off a third of the bourbon. Her head was still doing its little nodding dance. I figured I had about five minutes of her attention, no more.

"You've heard about Theresa," I said.

"Read about it in the *Post,*" Ethel said. "First thing this morning. I've been crying ever since. How did you know that Theresa and I were . . . acquainted?"

"I was there in the casino the day you passed Theresa the stacked deck."

I thought Ethel would kill a little time denying that, but she only said, "How did you find me?"

"Reverend Miller gave me your address."

Ethel didn't ask how I'd found my way to Miller. She cut right to the point as though our positions were reversed and she was afraid I'd shortly pass out on her. "What do you want?"

"I want to know who killed Theresa and why."

"Why do you think I can tell you?"

"Because I think there's a connection between the scam you dragged Theresa into and her murder. There has to be."

"There isn't," Ethel said. "I mean, there's a connection, but it's not an explanation. None of us, the people involved in the switch, would hurt a hair on Theresa's head. There was no reason to."

"Suppose Theresa threatened to turn herself in?"

"She would never have done that. She couldn't. She had responsibilities. It was one of the things that made her right for our work."

"You mean her brother?"

"Yes. Theresa would never do anything to hurt him. She would never have said anything to anybody."

"What's the connection that isn't an explanation?"

Ethel thought about it. "The money. I paid her five hundred dollars yesterday. Her part of our winnings. The paper said she was murdered by someone who was robbing her apartment. A man with a shaved head. The money we paid her got her killed."

It didn't even make a drunken sort of sense. "If the burglar was after the money, he had to know it was there. He had to have been tipped by one of your teammates."

"No!" Ethel shouted, mad at me finally. "I told you, none of us would do that. We're technicians, artists, not animals. The worst of us wouldn't so much as twist another person's arm."

"How did you enlist Theresa, then? You must have forced her somehow."

"Theresa and I got to know one another socially."

"At the Scrabble club."

"That's what we played, dear, but it wasn't the reason we met. It

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was just an excuse for lonely people to gather. Theresa was very lonely. She didn't have anybody close to her."

"She had her brother."

Ethel topped off her drink. Her anger hadn't lasted any longer than the previous round. "That kind of someone is worse than no one. Raul was the reason her life was empty, but you couldn't tell her that. She wouldn't listen. He was the key to obtaining Theresa's help. I saw that from the start."

"Theresa's help with the blackjack scam?"

"Yes. She told me she was a dealer the first night we met. She was so naive."

"Are you saying she went along with you to get money for Raul's tuition?"

"His tuition? What did she tell you? That he was studying to be a lawyer?"

"An artist," I said. I didn't mention Chastine's writer. I knew I didn't have to.

"It was lawyer the first time Theresa mentioned him to me. We played little Scrabble tournaments at our weekly meetings. Three games or rounds each night, with the players matched by Swiss pairings, the system they use at chess tournaments. In the first round, you were paired with someone by blind draw. For the next two rounds, you played the person who had the score closest to yours in the previous round. That way, players of similar ability tended to play one another. Hardly a week went by when I didn't play Theresa in a second or third round.

"We'd talk, a little during the game and a lot afterward, during the soda and cookies part of the evening. One week she told me about her brother, the lawyer-to-be. Then, the very next week, he was suddenly a doctor-to-be. When Theresa realized what she had done, she told me the truth."

"Which was what?"

"That he might have been any of the things she dreamt of him becoming, but he'd chosen to be a person who uses cocaine. Theresa gave him all her money, poor girl, and dreamt of him becoming something else. It's hard to say which one was sadder, the user or the dreamer."

"How about the con artist who took advantage of Theresa's dreams? You told me in the bar you'd found a new family. You meant the friends you'd made in your club. It didn't take you long to sell your family out."

Ethel nodded. "That's how I lost my first family. I sold them off, bit by bit. Now I've lost another one."

I'd been listening to her speak of the Scrabble club in the past tense. Now I understood why. And I understood the connection that wasn't a connection, the link Ethel saw between herself and the murder. It wasn't the money she'd paid Theresa.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You didn't show up last night for your meeting."

"I couldn't," Ethel said. "I couldn't bring myself to."

"Reverend Miller said Theresa was waiting for someone. You. When you didn't show, she knew she'd been used. She went home, where she wasn't supposed to be, and got killed."

"Yes," Ethel said, her tears flowing freely now. "It was my fault."

10.

I spent the rest of the long, wet day trying to trace Raul Rendeja. Ethel Taylor had assumed the guilt for Theresa's death—that part of the guilt I hadn't claimed for my own—but my money was on the brother. He'd certainly blighted his sister's life, which made it natural enough to think of him as somehow involved in the crime that had ended that life. And Theresa had been waiting for a call from him on the day she'd died. I was sure of that.

She'd been waiting to tell him she had his money, the next installment on a debt she'd never paid off. Something had gone wrong. Raul hadn't gotten the happy news. Maybe he'd grown tired of the wait. Or too desperate to wait.

Raul hadn't been the man Theresa had surprised in her apartment, not unless he'd shaved his head since his portrait had been taken. And if Raul had been a regular visitor to the Bell Street Arms, as I was guessing, the nosy downstairs neighbor would surely have known him by sight. It was important for my structure of unsupported suspicion and conjecture that Raul be familiar with his sister's apartment and her schedule. That way, he'd have known where to send an accomplice and when.

The other detail that argued against Raul being the murderer was the fight Theresa had put up to save the money. She'd tried to save it for Raul, not knowing that it, or part of it, would have found its way to Raul eventually.

I failed to find my own way to Raul. I asked for him at a drug rehabilitation center and two halfway houses, one in Atlantic City and one in Pleasantville, the nearby mainland town where Theresa had told me Raul lived. I tried the Pleasantville police station, using the same story: I wanted to find Raul so I could tell him what had happened to his dead sister. It was a true story as far as it went. Raul didn't need to hear how his sister had died, but I thought he should know what she'd sacrificed for him.

I never came close to finding Raul Rendeja. He wasn't known to the bureaucrats and workers in the drug-user support industry. Or to the police. Not yet.

The next morning I reported to work so I could be fired properly. I'd picked up an authentic cold during my wanderings in the rain, which pleased Manny, my supervisor. Robert Guineri, when he showed up at my station around ten, was harder to satisfy.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"This has been a hell of a bad week for people named Rendeja," he said as an opener.

"People?"

"First Theresa and now her brother, Raul. He was found dead early this morning in the Hotel Underwood."

I recognized the local nickname for the area beneath the boardwalk, the place where teenagers had sex and the homeless slept. "How did he die?"

"Drug overdose. Looks like he hit the lottery or something and couldn't stand the prosperity. He not only had a skinful, according to my contact, he also had a small collection of hundred-dollar bills in his pocket. Any thoughts on that, Keane?"

"None that haven't occurred to you."

Guineri said, "What occurs to me is that the brother dying on top of the sister getting offed violates the laws of probability. I think the brother must have been involved in the robbery and killing in some way. But I guess we'll never know for sure."

It wasn't an outcome I'd ever been able to accept, not if there was the smallest chance of knowing. Not even when my best interest lay in keeping my mouth shut.

"Anything written on any of those C-notes?" I asked, remembering the bill Ethel had flashed at the bar. Then, in the interests of self-preservation, I added, "Theresa had gotten one as a birthday present. Ask about lavender ink."

Guineri hauled himself off his stool and left me. Half an hour later, Manny was waving a phone at me. It was the security specialist.

"One of the hundreds said 'Happy Birthday' in lavender ink," he said. "But I checked Rendeja's personnel records. Her birthday was way back in November."

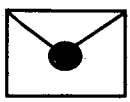
"So she hung onto it."

"How is it you knew about this present in the first place?"

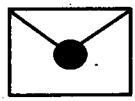
"I contributed," I said and hung up. ●

CUSTOMER SERVICE OR SUBSCRIBER ASSISTANCE

Please direct all changes of address and subscription questions to:



ELLERY QUEEN
P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80322-4625



For change of address, please advise 6 to 8 weeks before moving. Send your current mailing label with new address.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NOIR LITE

by Margaret Chittenden

It was like this, see.

The neon sign on the bar across the street is flicking on and off, on and off, making shadows across my office. I'm sitting with my feet up on my desk—listening to my stomach rumble—when this dame sashays into my office. She is blond and stacked, but she is not dressed the way a dame should dress. She's wearing a business suit. Carrying a briefcase. Skirt to the knees. Blouse buttoned up to the collar. Flat shoes. Hair cut short. Straight.

There was a time dames looked like dames. Clinging dresses, stiletto heels. Hair curling over creamy shoulders.

Margaret Chittenden has gained an enthusiastic following among mystery fans with her novels featuring a series character called Charlie Plato. The books are currently under contract to Kensington Publishing Corporation, which brought out two of the titles in 1998: *Dead Men Don't Dance* (mass market paperback), and *Dead Beat and Deadly* (hardcover). Due out in August of 1999, a new book: *Don't Forget to Die.* †

"What can I do for you, ma'am?" I ask. I'm always polite to possible clients. Can't afford not to be. Maybe I could get the dame to pay for dinner before I agreed to take on whatever case she'd brought in.

"I want you to tell me what it's like to be a P.I.," she says, all businesslike.

I stare at her blankly for a few seconds.

"You *are* a P.I.?" she asks, then adds, as if I don't know what that means, "A private investigator? A private eye? A private dick? A gumshoe?"

"I'm a private investigator, yes."

"Okay, then. What's it like?"

"This is not a school," I explain. "I don't train operatives."

She laughs as if I've cracked some kind of joke. This dame is beginning to irritate me. "God forbid," she says. "I don't want to *be* one. I just want to create one."

Staring at her blankly is becoming a habit.

"I'm a mystery writer," she says, speaking slowly, as if she's

©1998 by Margaret Chittenden

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

addressing a mentally defective person. "I write cozies."

"Cozies?" I have deduced that this dame is not here to hire me to crack a case. I mentally wave bye-bye to dinner. It occurs to me that this dame may be a couple of tacos short of a combination plate. I give a glance at the top right drawer of my desk. I'm not quite ready to go for my gun, but if it becomes necessary . . .

She indicates the chair on the other side of my desk. "May I?"

I nod, figuring I'd better humor her.

Before sitting, she flaps a hand at the chair and curls her lip. "Don't you ever dust?"

"We've established I'm a P.I., lady, not a housekeeper."

She laughs again in that superior way she has and sits down, back straight, briefcase on lap. It comes to me that she looks a lot like a schoolmarm I used to hate. Miss Branson, in fifth grade. "A cozy," she says, "is a type of mystery novel. A murder mystery, but without a lot of violence."

"How can you have a murder without violence?" I ask reasonably.

She gives one of those patient little sighs women give when the male gender has shown he's not as smart as the female gender would wish him to be. My mother used to sigh like that. Irritated the hell out of me. It comes to me this dame looks a lot like my mother, too.

"Well, of course the murder *involves* violence," she says. "But it takes place off-scene. The violence is implied rather than described. There's often a lot of humor in a cozy."

"Nothing humorous about murder," I point out.

She sighs again. Patiently.

"So what does all this have to do with me?" I ask.

"I've decided it's time for a change of pace. I've written enough cozies. I want to have a go at hard-boiled. Critics like hard-boiled. Men like hard-boiled. And there's probably more money in it."

She'd used my favorite word. "Money for who?" I ask.

"Whom," she says.

Whom is a word that is not and never will be in my vocabulary, Miss Branson and my mother notwithstanding.

I stare at the dame again, not blankly this time.

"Money for me," she says, as if there could be any doubt. "I'm the writer, remember? I do all the work." She opens the briefcase, takes out a notebook, puts it on my desk, and takes out a silver pen. I think that I could take that pen down to Rick's pawnshop on the corner and buy myself a really good dinner. And a bottle of Jack Daniels. The neon sign on the bar across the street flicks on and off, on and off.

"So . . . just go ahead in your own words," she says. "Describe what it's like to be a real P.I. A hard-boiled P.I. Somebody who walks the mean streets on a daily basis. Someone who rubs people out if they get in his way. So then I can create that kind of character."

"So you can make more money."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She beams at me as if I'm a child who has said something truly brilliant for his age group. "There you go," she says.

"Where would you suggest I begin?" I ask.

The sarcasm is lost on her. "You could tell me what kind of gat you use," she says.

"Gat?"

"Isn't that what your kind of person calls a gun? You must surely have a gun?"

I take out my gun and lay it on the table.

"Is that a pistol or a revolver?" she asks.

I give her a pitying look, but it's as wasted on her as the sarcasm. She's just sitting there with her pen poised.

"It's a revolver," I say. "It has this round thing, see, where you put the bullets. A pistol doesn't have the round thing."

She is writing everything down. "This is great," she says. "Authenticity is very important. I want you to seem like a real person."

"I am a real person," I say.

She laughs. "Did I say you?" she asks. "I meant him, of course. The character in my book. I'm going to make him just like you." She starts writing again, darting quick bright-eyed glances at me. "Five o'clock shadow. Make that seven o'clock. Badly in need of a haircut. Bags under the eyes. Sallow skin. Sleazy jacket."

"Tweed sport coat," I say.

"Tweed sport coat," she echoes, then adds, "which has seen better days." She glances at my feet, which are still on the desk. "Soles of shoes worn through. I bet you even have holes in your socks." There is a fond note in her voice.

I bring my feet down to the floor. I'm through with being polite. "Now look here, lady," I say. "I'm not going to sit here and let you insult me, just so you can write some kind of book I never even heard of. . . ."

"Doesn't read," she says to herself, and writes. "Hard-boiled fiction," she says to me, then sniffs the air. "It smells awful in here. You smoke, I suppose?"

Without waiting for an answer, she swivels her head to look at the hook to one side of my office door. "You actually wear a trench coat? Oh dear!"

I can feel my eyes narrowing to slits. "There's something wrong with wearing a trench coat?"

Luckily for her, she changes the subject. "How much do you charge for detecting?" she asks.

"When you decide to hire me, I'll tell you," I say.

"Thirty an hour? Thirty-five?"

I try not to blink.

She nods and writes. "Thirty-five. That would sort of put you in the lower echelon, detecting-wise, wouldn't you say?"

I'm through saying anything.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Do you do karate?" she asks. "Tai chi? No? Maybe you box? Wrestle?" She laughs. "Arm wrestle? You must do *something* physical."

I put my hand on my gun.

"Ah," she says, making another note. "No real skills, just relies on a weapon." She taps the end of her pen against her teeth, just the way Miss Branson used to when she was thinking up some insult to throw at me. "This isn't going to work, I'm afraid. You wouldn't know this, not being a reader, but you're a stereotype. You've been done before. I bet you even refer to women as dames."

She closes her notebook and gives me another of those bright, dismissing glances. "You even look a bit like Humphrey Bogart, you know?" She shakes her head. "Nope, I'm afraid you won't do at all. I need someone with some flair, some originality, some finesse."

I pick up my gun.

"Does it feel good to hold a gun?" she asks as she puts her notebook and pen away in her briefcase. "I mean, it's really an extension of your manhood, isn't it? Symbolic. You feel like a real man holding it, is that it?"

I keep my mouth closed. I stand up.

"That's when you shot her?" the assistant district attorney asked.

"Yeah," I said. "The one thing the dame forgot about mystery stories, see, the one thing I knew from watching old movies, was that if you show a gun anywhere along the way, you gotta use it before the story ends." ●

"Your honor, I want to request a mistrial.
This jury is clearly prejudiced against homicidal maniacs."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PYTHON

by Joseph Monninger

Mrs. Sheffield had the kind of house that makes you buy a lottery ticket at the next liquor store you visit. It was a classic New England Cape, freshly painted, with a stone wall bordering a wide, well-kept lawn. She had coaxed ivy up the chimney, decorated her porch with three barrels of daisies, and hung a hummingbird feeder near one window. But it was the view from the front yard that made the house spectacular. Halfway up the sidewalk, I turned and studied Mrs. Sheffield's ten acres of Squam Lake, New Hampshire. The lake stretched for miles east and west. The surface of the lake was flat, mirroring the trees.

A jack of all literary trades, Joseph Monninger has been successful publishing both fiction and non-fiction, in popular genres as well as for a more literary audience. Mystery fans may have seen the series of whodunits he sold to Donald I. Fine Publishers in the mid '90s, the first of which was entitled *Incident at Potter's Bridge*. Others may recall his mainstream novel from S&S: *The Viper's Tree*. Mr. Monninger's latest book is a memoir—*Home Waters: Fishing With an Old Dog*.†

I walked the rest of the way to the door and rang the bell. Mrs. Sheffield smiled as she opened the door. I had expected a retiree, but I was wrong. Mrs. Sheffield wore shorts and no shoes. Her legs were tanned and tight. I put her at thirty-seven, maybe forty-two. If she had been a dog, I would have said she had a glossy coat.

"Detective Poulchuck?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Thank you for coming so promptly."

"Slow day," I said. "You have a beautiful home. A wonderful view."

"We love it."

"Hard not to."

We didn't shake hands. We should have shaken hands; we both knew we should have shaken hands; we didn't. Instead she backed sufficiently to let me through the door. Then she turned and nodded toward the kitchen.

"Coffee?" she asked.

©1998 by Joseph Monninger

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'll pass."

"Do you mind if I do?"

"Not at all."

We sat at the kitchen table. It was a marble-topped table. I took out my notebook. I hardly ever write down anything worthwhile, but I found it soothed the people giving me reports. At least it told them they could begin.

"It's embarrassing," Mrs. Sheffield said, pouring coffee out of a kitchen thermos. It was the kind of thermos people use when they spend a lot of time dripping coffee through filters. "I gave a dinner party last night and someone stole something."

"What did the person steal?"

"A ring."

"Value?"

"Expensive, Detective."

"Approximate value?"

I wrote a question mark. She watched me write it. I wrote another one for the hell of it.

She said, "Maybe ten thousand dollars? I don't know. It was a gift."

"Do you suspect someone from the party?" I asked and wrote "ten g's." I underlined the "g's."

"Yes. I *know* it was someone, actually."

"How do you know that, Mrs. Sheffield?"

"He's done it before. Lots of times. Lots of places."

"Who would that be?"

She stopped. She drank some coffee, put the cup down, lifted it to see if it left a ring on the table, then put it down again. From an open window somewhere I smelled the lake. I also smelled the lawn and the leaves turning.

"It's embarrassing, as I said," Mrs. Sheffield said. "I wouldn't even say anything but my husband gave me that ring. And it's somewhat valuable."

"I understand," I said. "Did you see this person take it?"

"No, I didn't."

"Then how would you know he took it? It is a he, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"How would you know?"

"He's done it before. He has a reputation."

"And you still invited him to your party?"

"He's very wealthy. He comes from a prestigious family. That's why people don't press charges."

"You want to give me his name?"

"Gil Wilson."

"I know the name. It's a big name in New Hampshire."

"He eats them," Mrs. Sheffield said. "That's what I didn't tell you."

"Excuse me?"

"He eats things. Metal. That's what he does."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"So you think he ate your ring?"

"Yes."

"You want to explain?"

"That's what he does, Detective. It's a standing joke, though of course no one mentions it to him. He attends dinner parties, then excuses himself and goes to the bathroom. Then he'll slip in the master bedroom and swallow something. He usually shows better judgment. And he finds a way to make it up to the host."

"He swallows metal?"

"Yes. Jewelry in particular."

"Do you know why?"

"Sexual pleasure, I guess. I don't know."

"But this time he swallowed something more valuable than usual?"

"Exactly. It was probably a mistake."

"You sure about this, Mrs. Sheffield?"

"Yes. They call him the Python."

"Who does that?"

"Everyone," she said. "Everyone does."

"And you still had him to dinner?"

"This family is very important in New Hampshire, Detective."

"I understand."

"What will you do, Detective?"

"I'll talk to him."

Mrs. Sheffield bit her lip. Then she sipped her coffee. She debated. Then she shrugged.

"The ring meant a lot to me," she said. "Otherwise I wouldn't bother. My husband gave it to me."

"I'll get back to you."

"Would you?" she said. "Can you make it look like you're just checking on things?"

"That's all I'm doing."

"But you know," she said and looked out the window.

From a pay phone outside of a 7-Eleven I called Dr. Jill DuFresne. We had worked together several times over the years. She was a Ph.D. from Harvard, now teaching at Plymouth State College. She told me more than once that she could have taught at Dartmouth or Yale except that she preferred teaching to publication. I said that was okay with me. Her secretary didn't recognize my name. She buzzed Dr. DuFresne anyway. No one picked up. The call bounced back out to the secretary.

"Do you know when she'll be in?" I asked the secretary.

I watched a kid with a jittery haircut jump off a curb on a skateboard. Then he jumped back up again. The metal wheels made a loud clacking sound, then gave way to the old roller-skate sound.

"She's supposed to be in now," the secretary said. "She has office hours scheduled."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It's summer," I said. "She keeps office hours in the summer?"

"It's late summer. Pre-registration. Classes begin next week."

"Okay."

"Do you want to hold and see?"

"Hold for her to get back?" I asked. "Not knowing how long that could be?"

"Wait a second," the secretary said, "here she is. She's Xeroxing."

The boy went down the curb again. I saw a manager or someone watch him out the store window. A younger kid, a boy about the skateboard boy's age, knocked on the window. The boy inside made a cutting motion across his throat. The skateboard boy got the message and kicked the skateboard up into his hand. He sat on the curb and waited, spinning one of the skateboard wheels with his finger.

"Detective Poulchuck?" Dr. DuFresne said, the sound of Xeroxing still going. "Long time no hear."

"It's been awhile."

"You have something to ask me? I'm in kind of a rush."

"I want to know if you ever heard of someone swallowing metal objects on purpose."

"Sure, it happens. Everything happens."

Dr. DuFresne covered the phone for a second. "Both sides," she said to someone, then uncovered the mouthpiece.

I asked, "Why would someone do that?"

"Who knows?"

"You're the psychologist. You tell me."

"It's always the same thing. Someone's trying to fill something up."

"That's the whole thing?"

"A pun, Detective?"

"Not meant to be."

She took a breath, said, "Why do people love to wear plastic bags? Or fornicate with rubber dolls? Or be kicked by men in sweat socks? I can record the phenomena, Detective, not necessarily explain them."

"A woman thinks a man she had to dinner swallowed her ring."

"It's possible."

"They say he does it regularly. Wouldn't he die pretty soon?"

"I'm sure he eliminates a lot of it."

"I guess."

"It's a strange world, Detective. I don't have to tell you."

"But you did anyway."

"I thought you needed reminding." She covered the mouthpiece again. When she came back on, she said, "I have students waiting, Detective. Anything else?"

"No, Doctor. I appreciate it."

"You should," she said and hung up.

Mary, a female butler, let me in Mr. Wilson's house. I knew her name was Mary because she told me. She was tall and dark and gave

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the impression of never having been a little girl. She wore a sedate tuxedo, stylish, that possessed a feminine cut. Mary seemed intent on out-butlering any male butler who cared to challenge her.

"I'll see if he's available," she told me when I asked if Mr. Wilson was around.

She asked if I had a card.

I probably did, somewhere, but I told her I didn't. I showed her my badge instead. She left me standing in a hallway that had a checkered floor while she padded away in Doc Martens. She walked on her toes.

She walked back to me on her toes about five minutes later and asked me to follow her. I did. She led me to the only private library I had ever visited that boasted its own set of authentic armor. At least, I assumed it was authentic. It stood by the fireplace and appeared short enough to have once belonged to a knight of the Middle Ages. The library had books around three walls and windows from ceiling to floor on the fourth wall. The windows looked out on a perennial bed. The perennial bed picked up the red hues of the oriental carpet. Taken altogether, it was the kind of room that made you think drinks on the lawn and croquet might comprise an interesting afternoon.

Wilson came in a few minutes later. He wore a blue blazer, tan slacks, and black penny loafers. His shirt had a red stripe and appeared starched; the cuffs seemed to know just when to pop out from his jacket sleeves for a second. He had a tan and an almost bald head. He looked rich. He looked like a hundred other rich guys, except that his mouth was wider than normal. I couldn't look at him without thinking it was a whale's mouth, a baleen, a gap in his head that sifted plankton and smaller people until he had taken nutrition from them.

"Detective Poulchuck?" Mr. Wilson said, coming forward to shake my hand. "I hope I have your name right. Are you Polish?"

"Hungarian."

"Ah. Magyar."

"Mostly American."

"Of course, of course," he said.

His handshake was firm, but the rest of his arm seemed to hang limp so that I had the weight of it in my arm. He was the type who liked to look you directly in the eye until one of you had to look away. I looked away. He let go of my hand.

"Won't you sit down, Detective?" he asked. "Would you care for something to drink? An iced tea?"

"No, thank you."

I pulled out my notebook.

"Well, at least sit."

"Thank you."

We sat. I sat on a leather couch that made sounds like a cowboy getting off a horse whenever I moved. Mr. Wilson sat on a cloth

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rocker. We didn't say anything for a moment. Somewhere in the house I heard a vacuum going. It buzzed louder for a second, then seemed to drift away. Then I heard it bump into a wall and a cord drag across the floor. Mr. Wilson didn't seem to notice.

"I'd like to ask you a couple of questions," I said to Mr. Wilson. "I'm curious about a few things. I have an odd situation, I'm afraid."

"Questions?" Mr. Wilson said. "Well, dear me. I suppose I can answer questions. Nothing to hide, as they say."

"They say that," I said, figuring there wasn't any way to ease into the necessary line of questioning. "I wonder if you could tell me anything about a missing ring at the Sheffields' house. You attended a dinner party there last night, didn't you?"

"At the Sheffields'?"

"You were there at dinner last night."

"No, of course, I know the name. I made the connection, I mean. They're missing a ring?"

"Seems like it."

"Dreadful," Mr. Wilson said and seemed to mean it.

"Funny circumstances," I said. "You can understand her desire to be discreet."

"Certainly. Friends to dinner, a ring missing. Well," he said. "I can well understand."

"She thinks you might have taken it."

"I?"

The vacuum went off, then started up again. I wrote something in the notebook. It was the name of my fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Isaacs. I wrote the name of my third-grade teacher, Mrs. Lindstrom, and waited some more.

"I suppose I'm offended," Mr. Wilson said after a moment. "Am I supposed to say something?"

"Understandable that you might be offended. Can you guess why she thinks you took the ring?"

"I have no idea."

"She thinks you ate it," I said, and this time I met his eyes and he turned away.

"Ate it?" he said.

"Swallowed it."

"Swallowed it?" he said, but his color changed. "Why on earth would I swallow a . . . what was it?"

"A ring."

"A ring, then."

"The psychologist at the college thinks it's to fill a sexual void. If you did swallow it, I mean."

"Detective Poulchuck, this is insulting. I don't know anything about Mrs. Sheffield's ring. Surely I'm not the only person you're interviewing. There must have been ten people at the party."

"You married?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Just curious," I said. "What I'd like to do is to bring you to the emergency room and get an X-ray. That would prove it one way or the other."

"If you think I'm going to accompany you to the hospital, you're sadly mistaken."

"Did you eat it?"

"No, of course not."

"You eat other things at other parties?"

"I'm going to stop answering your absurd questions, Detective. I think you're being deliberately insulting now. I think this interview is finished."

"I am trying to find a ring. No insult intended."

"Perhaps you don't realize I'm not without a certain amount of influence in this area."

"Is that a double negative?" I asked, then tried to bluff him. "Would it matter if you knew we had your fingerprints in the master bedroom. On the dressing table?"

"You can't have them because I wasn't there."

"Okay," I said. "Thank you for your time."

"Who is your superior, Detective Poulchuck?"

"Just about everyone," I said, standing, "but the woman you want to talk to is Chief Libby. Call her up in Plymouth."

"I'll do that," he said. Mary showed me out.

I called Chief Libby, told her what had occurred with Gil Wilson. She said she'd wait for the call. I asked her if she had any brainstorms about how to proceed. She said she'd buy a big magnet and stick it on Wilson's stomach. That was a joke, she said.

Afterward I ate a hamburger at Burger King and bought a lemonade from two kids at a front-yard stand. The kids had a hose under the table. I suspected maybe they watered down their drinks, increasing profit if not customer satisfaction. The lemonade tasted like wilted vase water. The kids put the quarter in an old-fashioned plastic purse that poked out with turtle lips to take the coin.

I called Mrs. Sheffield and asked her if she could tell me where Mr. Sheffield worked. She said he did private investing, but also ran a small gallery in Sandwich. The gallery was open from ten until two, or by appointment. It featured watercolors, Mrs. Sheffield said to me.

I drove to Sandwich. The town was mossy and green, with lots of shade and windows wide open. The church looked white. Mr. Sheffield's gallery was called, practically enough, the Sheffield Sandwich Gallery. Sheffield and Sandwich shared an S, with the Sandwich going horizontal, the Sheffield going vertical. The gallery was as big as a breakfast restaurant, with bare birch floors and white walls covered with watercolors. Mr. Sheffield sat behind an archi-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tect's desk, his glasses propped on his forehead. He was older than Mrs. Sheffield, but not by much. He wore a pale blue dress shirt, a tie that tried damn hard to be interesting, and Top-Siders without socks. He smiled when I stepped inside, but he didn't say anything. A book lay open in front of him. It was big and wide, an art book.

"Mr. Sheffield?" I said. "I'm Detective Poulchuck."

"Congratulations," he said.

"Funny," I said. "Your wife call you to tell you I was on my way?"

"Yes, Detective."

"She tell you I've been over to see Mr. Wilson?"

"Yes," he said and finally closed the book in front of him, keeping a finger in it to mark his place. Then he looked at me and let the finger slip out. His eyes appeared tired. He reached behind him and took out a handkerchief. He rubbed it over his forehead, down into his eyes, over his mouth. Then he stuffed it back in his pocket.

"Your wife thinks Mr. Wilson took the ring. What do you think?"

"Swallowed it, you mean?"

"Maybe."

"It's almost a metaphor . . . a man swallowing things. He's prominent in New Hampshire. In the Republican party, particularly."

"Your wife wants the ring back."

"Insurance will cover it," Mr. Sheffield said. "I didn't think she should report it to the police. I advised against it. But she went ahead anyway. She does that. She hates the idea that he might get away with this. With doing this over and over at people's houses. It bothers her."

"You'd have to report it to the police to collect on the insurance."

"You're probably right, but I wanted to report it as missing and leave it at that. It wouldn't matter to the insurance company how it disappeared."

"If I ran a check on your finances, what would I find?" I asked.

"You think I might have taken the ring?"

"I guess I didn't say that."

He looked at me. The glasses still hung on his forehead. He lowered them slowly, letting them fit to his nose. He seemed to think about how to answer me.

"You'd find," he said, after a moment, "that I'm a very rich man."

"Congratulations," I said.

"Touché."

"So where would you like me to go from here?" I asked. "I can't make Mr. Wilson give back the ring. It's not a bad way to steal something, when you get right down to it. That is, if he stole something."

"Just file the report," Mr. Sheffield said, "the insurance company will take care of it. We can say it's missing, as I said."

"Who's your insurance agent?"

"I really don't know."

"What company?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Matewson and Brothers," Mr. Sheffield said. "It's a local company."

"Okay," I said. "I'll file the report. It's up to the insurance company, really."

"Thank you, Detective," Mr. Sheffield said.

He put his head back in his book. He didn't look up when I went outside.

I drove back to Mrs. Sheffield's house. She was in her yard, gardening. She wore the same shorts she had worn earlier. She wore a straw hat that was old but appeared to have been beaten by an angry salesperson to make it look old. She had a large brass fork in her hand and a couple of day lilies halved in front of her. Transplanting. She was still barefoot. She stood when I came up the front walk. She stretched her back and turned to smile at me. It was a pretty smile. She knew it was a pretty smile. She raised her hand and framed her face, ostensibly to keep out the late sun, but mostly to frame her face.

"Not much luck, I'm afraid," I said. "You may have to file an insurance form. Your husband says your agent is with Matewson and Brothers."

"Did you go to Mr. Wilson?"

"Yes, I did. He says he didn't take anything."

"Well, you wouldn't expect him to admit it, would you?"

"I'm not sure what you would like me to do. You want me to give him the rubber-hose treatment?"

"No reason to be glib, Detective."

"You're right. No more glib."

Her smile hardened just a bit. It wasn't easy to see it, but it was there. I looked at her eyes. She hated Mr. Wilson and she hated me for letting him off the hook. She hated a lot of people, actually. That's what I saw in her eyes.

"You don't like Mr. Wilson much," I said, turning to look a little at the water. "Funny you would bother to have him to your house."

"I told you, Detective, he's an important man in this state. I'm sure you know that."

"People are only important if you want something from them. What did you want from him, Mrs. Sheffield?"

"Not a damn thing," she said. "Remember, I didn't take his ring, Detective."

"Why have him to your house, though?" I asked. "That's what I can't figure. Just a social engagement?"

"Yes, just a social engagement."

"So you won't have him again," I said. "He's pretty much off the list."

"Yes, he's off the list."

"Well, I'm sorry I couldn't be more help."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I turned to go. Then it clicked. It clicked because she turned back to her gardening a little too quickly. It clicked because she had known all along what the outcome would be and wasn't disappointed at losing her ring. It was the only thing that made sense. The ring wasn't gone unless she had taken it. No, what was gone was Mr. Wilson's support. Maybe he did eat things. Maybe he had a reputation for it. And maybe Mrs. Sheffield had heard the rumors, found them titillating, and found in them just the right way to alienate Mr. Wilson irrevocably. No reason to do that unless you had a husband who had political aspirations in the Republican party in New Hampshire and you hated those aspirations. Gil Wilson wasn't going to come to any more parties, political or otherwise, for the Sheffields. Gil Wilson wasn't going to swallow her husband. Mrs. Sheffield had seen to that. Mrs. Sheffield had taken matters into her hands and handled it all with great efficiency.

She bent back to the day lilies and jiggled one apart. I thought about saying I knew what she was up to, but I didn't care enough to do it. I went down the flagstone walk slowly. I stood next to my car for a second and looked at Squam Lake. It was going to be a pretty autumn, with leaves filled with ants floating like slave galleys across all that water. ●

Solution to the Mystery Crossword

D	A	M	E	S	■	T	A	M	E	■	B	O	N	D
A	B	E	L	E	■	A	R	A	N	■	A	L	E	E
S	E	D	U	M	■	R	A	N	T	■	L	I	M	E
■	T	I	D	E	W	A	T	E	R	B	L	O	O	D
■	■	■	E	S	E	■	■	T	A	R	■	■	■	■
C	A	R	■	T	E	E	N	■	C	A	R	T	E	R
A	B	O	D	E	■	D	O	S	T	■	I	R	M	A
P	O	W	E	R	I	N	T	H	E	B	L	O	O	D
E	V	E	S	■	D	A	R	E	■	R	E	A	T	A
R	E	D	I	A	L	■	E	D	D	O	■	D	E	R
■	■	■	■	L	E	S	■	■	A	I	D	■	■	■
P	A	Y	M	E	N	T	I	N	B	L	O	O	D	■
A	L	A	E	■	E	A	S	E	■	E	N	N	E	A
P	A	L	E	■	S	T	E	R	■	R	A	T	E	D
A	N	E	T	■	S	E	E	D	■	S	T	O	R	E

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Far in an Eastern Airport

by Gerald Tomlinson

(With Apologies to A.E. Housman)

As smog hung over Newark,
And drifted toward Bayonne,
I fled by Flight 6 aisle seat
And left my stabbed wife Joan
As ghastly white as bone.

A skycap at the airport
Waved, pounced, and snatched my bags;
He aimed me toward a limo;
I mused, "A wife who nags—"
He grinned, "Or goes on jags."

And then the skycap spooked me:
"But what the hell," he said,
"Ain't no wife all that perfect
In liquor or in bed,
And then betimes she's dead."

I knew no ill he bore me,
But nerves drawn taut can snap;
I aimed my fist and flung it,
It struck, a thunderclap:
My skycap took a nap.

At which a guard in mufti
Took up the skycap's case,
He locked my arms behind me,
Two cops rushed up apace;
One bellowed in my face:

"The fens and sloughs of Lyndhurst
Shroud many a sprightly knave,
But you need fear no capos,
For you, lad, jurors pave
The path from jail to grave."

Poem ©1976 by Gerald Tomlinson

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

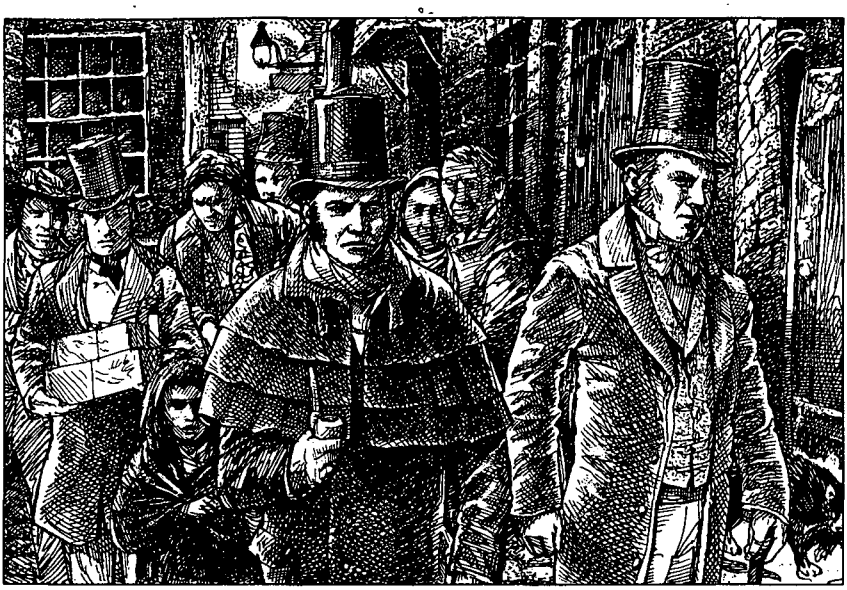


Illustration by Allen Davis

A Gallows Song

by James Powell

Christmas Eve in the twentieth year of the reign of Her Majesty Queen Victoria, God bless her, finds me sitting in the bar parlor of Joe's, Finch Lane, Cornhill. Without fail, each new arrival coming through the outside door stamped his feet and shuddered as if to cast off the burden of the early evening's cold and fog and then, like a wide-eyed sleepwalker, followed his outstretched palms to the fireplace hearth.

There I am, snug and warm in the dim corner with the solemn young gentleman who, to my surprise, had asked me to take a glass of something with him. When my second gin and hot water was set in front of me, my host said, "You have been pointed out to me as a detective, Mr. Crowdy. Or should I say Inspector?"

"Sergeant, sir," I replied. "Advancement comes slow in the detective service. Is it any wonder some of us come here now and then to ease the burden of our office over a cup of cheer. And a good place for a mutton chop and a mealy potato." Here I gestured toward the dining-room door. "But the beer's bad. For beer it's the Walsingham off Threadneedle Street. The Dancing Pig, we call it, sir, if you follow our little jest."

©1998 by James Powell

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

While I spoke, I examined him more closely, since some purpose seemed to lurk behind his invitation. Age, twenty-five at most. Chest and shoulders well developed. Eyes standing wide apart, blue and of the judging sort. Face marked by the sun. A man who lived a vigorous outdoor life. No weak-chested Londoner here, with fog-colored cheeks. A well-spoken gentleman in boots and well-made, newish clothes. A cavalry officer back from our recent war with the Russians in the Crimea? More likely a trooper, for didn't I catch something of Camden Town in his voice? They say some claret-wise Frenchmen can name you region, vineyard, and field with a taste. London accents are my claret, a skill I bring to my work, though few appreciate it.

A note from author James Powell about his research for "A Gallows Song" indicates that he first heard the song referred to in the story on a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation radio program in the 1940s. Many years later, he was astonished to find the song's lyrics included in a book about 1840s London. With only a couple of changes to fit with modern usage, he has reproduced those lyrics for us here, in an ingenious tale. ¶

Could he be one of the tribe who earn a living scribbling for the popular press? Several of my colleagues, primed by a cheering glass or two, had had their brains sucked as clean as an orange by these clever questioners and later found their police adventures set down in some popular magazine or newspaper without a penny in their pockets for their effort. Surely it is not fair to muzzle the ox who grinds the grain.

"I think perhaps you and I may do each other some good, Sergeant Crowdy. I have been abroad for several years and am reintroducing myself to London. I have a free evening ahead of me and understand that men of your profession will sometimes act as guides to the more colorful parts of the city."

"Now and then, sir, for a consideration, we do take gentlemen on a go-round of the thieves' quarters in Whitechapel and the famous kitchens and rookeries of the Seven Dials and the Mint. But please understand, sir, even a detective would prefer to spend these holidays in the bosom of his family." I said this even though, truth to tell, my Lavinia, Mrs. Crowdy, was spending her holidays with her sister Mae-Belle and her husband, the tedious Mr. Ming, the prosperous lead-pencil manufacturer. Mr. Ming's idea of entertaining guests is to reach into a large bin with his eyes closed and come up with innumerable handfuls of pencils, exactly a dozen in each, which handfuls he would pass to Mae-Belle, who would tie them with a red ribbon and box them by the gross. As an excuse to stay home I resurrected an old concoction from a previous occasion, Arch Mac-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Conachie, the Paddington coin shaver. So I would be a bachelor for the holidays. But what need to mention that?

"Oh, it will be worth your while," my young man promised.

"Then consider this, sir. A tour of the dens of Shadwell, capped off with a sight you will never, never see again: a visit to certain sailors' taverns in the Ratcliffe Highway where they dance the double hornpipe in chains, inspired by last year's stage presentation of *Jack Sheppard.*"

"The very thing, I think," came his dry reply.

"Yes, sir, a riotous spectacle if you'd care to witness it. Sheppard danced the hangman's quadrille a good hundred years ago. But in his time he was as mob-popular as our own Captain Socks today."

The young man gave me a sharp look.

"But then, you've been abroad, sir, and would not have heard of Captain Socks. A daring highwayman; he and his gang have plagued our outlying districts these last few years. He earned his name the night he pulled woolen stockings over his horse's hooves and cantered down a cobbled stretch of road past a whole company of soldiers waiting among the trees to apprehend him. Captain Socks, the last of the highwaymen, they say. Soon we'll do all our traveling on wings of steam. How the world is changing."

"How, indeed," agreed the young man, adding, "and as for our 'go-round,' if you do not mind, I would like to make a stop along the way. It is not far from here and my business will be brief."

I stood up. "Then let us start, sir. The darker it gets, the less they care for strangers where we are going, although you will be safe with me."

My young man took up a capacious and many-caped coat of the sort coachmen wear, "rascal-wraps," they used to call them, and we stepped back out into the gloom and weather.

We emerged from the tangle of lanes and proceeded eastward past shops hung with Christmas decorations, with the young man leading the way. Cabs rattled by. People hurried on all sides, most with parcels or carrying tomorrow's festive dinner to the bake shop. "Considering the season, I'd think you'd like to be among family yourself this evening," I was inspired to ask.

"I have no family. My parents died some years past," came his reply. He shook his head at my condolences. "My father was a drunkard. One night during an attack of the snakes he rushed out into the street and fell under the wheels of a dray. My mother died not long thereafter of a broken heart."

Then, as if impatient to set my curiosity to rest, he added, "I had a sister who drowned herself in the Thames. Another married unwisely to escape our dismal home and later followed her condemned wretch of a husband to Australia. And my brother fell in an ensign's uniform in the Kaffir war. I am without family."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He said this last sharply, like a box snapping shut. He fell silent and led me down several narrow streets, each darker than his words.

But like the Irishman on the crowded tram who complained he'd rather walk a mile than stand three, I would rather walk three miles alone than one with a gloomy and tight-lipped companion. (I have, on several occasions, been reprimanded by my superiors for nattering on.) So when we came under a streetlamp and a chimney sweep passed with his bag of soot and his two climbing boys with their burden of brushes, shuffling homeward toward Whitechapel with tired feet, I said cheerily, "It's good luck to see a sweep, sir. It promises an entertaining evening ahead." When he said nothing, I continued, "Have you ever heard it said, sir, that the little sweeps are all sons of great families, kidnapped into the trade, or, as some say, condemned to it for a certain period of time for the crime of not obeying their nurses?"

"Sergeant, you make chimney sweeping sound like a kind of apprenticeship for the House of Lords."

Laughing, I insisted, "Surely you know the story of the little sweep who lost his way in the chimneys of Montague House, came out into a splendid bedroom, and, too tired to go on, fell asleep on the white sheets where Lady Montague found him and recognized her own child stolen several years before."

"Golden lads and lasses must, like chimney sweepers come to dust," quoted my charge.

"Sir?"

"Cymbeline."

"Ah, Shakespeare," I said. "I didn't know soot had been around so long. Well, it is clear that, orphan or not, sir, you are an educated man."

He spoke not so much to answer my veiled question as to lay it to rest. "I was raised by my father's employer, whom in my youthful innocence I took to be a good man. A sickly boy, I was sent at his expense to live with a country doctor where the air and food were wholesome. He would visit me there and fill me with stories of Aladdin and Ali Baba and Robinson Crusoe and Don Quixote's windmill chivalry until I came to believe all life was that magical.

"When I went away to school, he always brought me to stay with him at Christmas. Since he expected I would follow him into his business, he sent me to the university. There I fell in with evil companions who showed me that no matter how deep his slumber, a sweep will never awake a lord and lady's son."

I waited for him to explain what he meant. But he did not and fell silent again. To coax him from his thoughts I said, "Nevertheless, sir, you may believe it or not, but I am a myrmidon of the law today because of a chimney sweep."

Though he seemed to show no interest in my words, I went on to tell him how, in my youth, I had been an apprentice clerk for a lum-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ber importer on the docks. I was unmarried then, and at night my favorite resorts were the old supper and singing taverns, the Coal Hole, Evans's, and, more particularly, the Cider Cellars, behind the Strand by the stage door of the Adelphi in Maiden Lane.

It was a musty, dusty place dimmed by tobacco smoke and crammed with young apprentices and assistants, medical students, young guardsmen, and the cubs of St. James Street come to dine on stout and deviled kidneys in the small hours and applaud the singing acts with our tumblers on the table. My favorite, and I was far from alone in this, was the great Ross, a bass whose "The Death of General Wolfe" and "The Banner of Blood" would make a lead statue shed lead tears. And his "The Body Snatcher" was an immense hit. He began seated on a coffin, his awful face lit by a candle stuck atop a human skull. He held a spade in his hand which he thumped on the stage during the chorus to accompany a demonic "Ha! Ha!" When he was done, few of us looked forward to walking home alone in the dark.

But his biggest success was "The Ballad of Sam Hall." How we brought the house down when the great Ross made his appearance in rags, under a battered hat and all sooted up like the murderous chimney sweep! But, oh, he shut us up soon enough. Sitting backwards in a chair he'd grab the rungs like the bars of a cell and glare around the room. Never have I seen such hate in human eyes. Then, when he had silence, he would take the short black pipe from his brutal mouth and utter the song of Sam Hall in prison on the night before his hanging:

"My name it is Sam Hall,
Chimney sweep, Chimney sweep:
My name it is Sam Hall, chimney sweep;
I've robbed both great and small;
And now I pays for all:
Damn your eyes!"

Then he goes on to describe how the next morning would unfold: the arrival of the sheriff and his bailiffs, the arrival of the hangman, the drive in the open cart to Tyburn, the wait at the foot of the gallows for the parson.

"And the parson, he will come,
He will come, he will come:
And the parson he will come, he will come.
And the parson he will come,
And he'll look so blasted glum;
And he'll talk of Kingdom Come:
Damn his eyes!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The final terrifying stanza went like this:

"And now I goes upstairs,
To the drop, to the drop:
And now I goes upstairs, to the drop;
And now I goes upstairs,
There's a hend to all my cares:
So you'll send me all your prayers:
Damn your eyes!"

My silent companion had been listening to my every word, for here he burst out, "*'Damn your eyes!'* That's good. That's very good, indeed."

"Good, sir? Why, good enough to turn my blood to ice and set me brooding on my wastrel ways. In the end I decided that if life was a battle between the law and the Sam Halls of this world, then I must fight on the side of law. So I left the old mill-horse grind of the docks to join the fledgling detective service."

As I spoke we had continued our walk, setting our course by the hazy stars the infrequent streetlamps hung for us in the fog and gloom. Foot traffic had fallen to nothing in these narrow ways. But we were never alone. The darkness at our elbows was crowded. If we showed any interest on either side a figure would step to the curb: a woman with a sad basket of dried lavender and a baby in a shawl at her breast, a stunted child offering a chipped plate or a cracked mug for sale, an old man so befuddled by drink or hunger that he hawked fly paper in the wintertime from the stack across his arm.

These ghostly apparitions, I well knew, were only the feeble outriders of a vast defeated army huddled in the darkness behind them, in doorways, on doorsteps, along the walls—harmless creatures who seemed to draw warmth from fog, shadow, and stone. Shadwell's darkness would hide far more dangerous surprises.

I was used to these night streets. But not my young companion. We turned a corner where a flaring light marked the entrance to a public house and stripped away the darkness to reveal the gray homeless legion on either side. He had to gasp and wonder in an amazed whisper, "Does the darkness spawn them? How can there be so many? If there is a prayer to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, let us say it now. For surely we are doomed by so many."

"You sound like Captain Socks, sir. 'Stand and deliver or die and decrease the surplus population!' is his grim cry when he shoves his impressive Colt Navy revolver through the coach window.

"Felon or not and fit for the gallows, I am sure. Yet your highwayman speaks well," said the young man. "If there is only enough food for two and we are three then one of us must starve. If there are only two jobs and we are three then one of us must starve. My bad companions at the university taught me that. Mr. Bentham and Mr.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Malthus and Mr. Mill, sitting there upright in a stout row bound in leather on the library shelf.

"From them I learned the true nature of things. The iron law of scarcity, Sergeant Crowdy, as implacable as any law you serve. It determines prices and wages and those who break that law stand as guilty as your Sam Hall. Of course, the very day I understood all this and recognized my benefactor for the villain he really was, I fled the university and made my own way in the world."

The huddled forms and shapes around us seemed to fuel his ravings. "Before this great truth was taught to me," he continued, "I had thought my dear foolish sister a suicide. But now I saw my benefactor had killed her as surely as if he had thrown her into the river himself. And he killed my older brother, too, as surely as if he'd thrust the Kaffir spear himself."

I took him by the arm and dragged him away. "I don't allow this wild talk, sir," I said. "Please remember who you are speaking to."

My words seemed to sober him. After we had walked for a bit he asked in a careful voice, "I'm sure you would agree, Sergeant, that all price is settled by the law of supply and demand, wages included, they being only the price of labor."

"I know little of that. All I know is, sure as eggs is eggs, whatever I want is dear and what I don't is cheap." Then I said, "You are limping, sir. Have we gone too far?"

"An old affliction revisits me sometimes if I'm too long afoot. Our destination is at hand. Then I'll rest and be well again."

He led me onward, down another street and into a court and past an overgrown little churchyard with an iron gate. At last I ventured, "Since you brought it up, sir, how did you make your living after you so abruptly—some might say rashly—turned your back on your benefactor?"

Instead of answering, the young man said, "I can remember Christmases happier than this. I once knew a poor family of six. The father brought home just fifteen shillings a week, barely enough to scrape by. The mother labored hard to keep the threadbare house clean and put food on the table, making each farthing count for two. The eldest daughter worked in a milliner's shop. The youngest helped her mother with the two boys. A hard, dreary life. Yet some would say their Christmases were happy. They were like aerialists on a wire over a great abyss."

"Like Blondin who crossed Niagara Falls?"

"Even so," he agreed. "The Blondin family strung out one after the other on that long wire. But if each step was laid down as carefully as a coin well spent, then might the mother and father bring the children across the abyss." He uttered a dark laugh and added, "And enjoy the bleak satisfaction of seeing their children have children, too, driving up the price of bread and forcing wages down.

"And then one Christmas Day bad dreams prompted the father's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

employer to play God and meddle with nature. Overnight this businessman who had never bought one thing at a penny above its price decided to raise his clerk's wages and take the man's whole family under his care. Dowries for the girls and help for the boys to make their way in the world."

"A very generous employer."

"Say you so, Sergeant? Then mark the outcome of his folly. Are you familiar with smoking-bishop?"

"Not as much as I would like, sir," I replied, hoping levity might calm his passion, though in truth, gin and water is my drink. Not punch, whether hot or cold.

"The father had a weakness for smoking-bishop, though seldom the money to indulge it. But now he and his employer sat down regularly over a steaming bowl at day's end and mapped and planned the family future. Then, slightly tipsy, for he was always urged on to take the lion's share, the clerk would return home to drink some more. The poor mother, abandoned by her neighborhood friends, who envied her recent good fortune, found little cure for her loneliness in a drunken and abusive husband."

We had turned onto a street of warehouses and buildings let out as offices. "Here we are," announced my guide, pointing up a yard to a four-story building set back from the street as though too shy to stand forward with the rest. The house was dark. It seemed we had come a piece for nothing. But at least we could stop and rest before continuing with the night's adventures.

The young man turned up the ample collar of his coat against the cold and returned to his story. "The oldest daughter of the family, the shop girl, had won the heart of the milliner's son. But now, with a dowry, she scorned him. She had begun to see her husband-to-be's coach-and-four followed by footmen in the tea leaves in the bottom of her cup. And, indeed, by a sad trick of the tea leaves the man who pretended to be a baronet to seduce her did turn out to be a footman. I've told you how that story ended and how the second daughter married in haste to escape the unhappy house. And the fate of the oldest boy, who bought a commission in an infantry regiment."

"You said a family of six, sir. What about the youngest son?"

My guide started to answer. Then suddenly he laid a finger across his lips.

I heard a quick step on the cobbles and looked just in time to see a gaunt old man pass under the corner streetlamp. Except for a bright red comforter around his neck, he was dressed in black from his toes to the top of his beaver hat and laden down with festive-looking parcels, perhaps Christmas presents for a relative's children. These parcels he cheerfully juggled to find a coin when a beggar stepped out of a doorway. He was humming happily by the time he reached us and, wishing us a "Merry Christmas, gentlemen," he turned into the yard. As he did he executed a nice little dance step whose liveli-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ness belied his age, while suggesting he was practicing for dancing and parlor games on the morrow.

Suddenly my companion took a step forward and cried out harshly, "Old man!"

The man in the red comforter swung round with a frown. He stared and looked again. "Tim?" he wondered. Suddenly his face shone with happiness and tears dressed his cheeks. "My soul, yes, it is. It's Tiny Tim come back to us for Christmas. God bless us every one!"

"Scrooge, goddamn your eyes!" was the young man's loud reply. He had drawn a pistol from somewhere in his vast overcoat. Before I could act he fired. The old man fell to the ground and did not move. I stepped toward him, suspecting he would never move again. But my young companion blocked my way to surrender his weapon. "You asked me what I did," he said, nodding at the Colt Navy revolver. "Now you know."

Police hobnails sounded on the cobbles and bull's-eye lanterns bobbed toward us. Two constables emerged from the darkness. One came to assist me. The other knelt to examine the body and, after a moment, caught my eye and shook his head. "Captain Socks," I said, "I arrest you for murder and highway robbery."

"A feather in your cap for Christmas, Sergeant Crowdy," said the highwayman grandly, as though bestowing a gift. "And I'm not done yet. I shall also name to you my confederates. Why take the drop alone when I can reduce the population surplus even more. Let the gallows creak and moan like a hurdy-gurdy song from the weight of us."

Here the constable at the body stood up. As if this was a signal, ragged men and women stepped out of the shadows on all sides. Without any direction from us they raised the corpse with very careful hands, placed it on a tattered blanket, and carried it over to an empty costermonger's pushcart. Then, with the constable leading the way, the ghostly gray cortege set out for the stationhouse.

My prisoner and I and the other constable fell in behind. I must admit myself somewhat bewildered by the sudden tragic turn of events. I was even uncertain who this Mr. Scrooge was and what role he played in Captain Socks's story. And it did nothing to banish my ignorance when I heard one mourner tell another in a grieving voice, "Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge knew as well as any man alive how to keep Christmas." ●

NOTE TO READERS: *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* is now on the Web! In addition to excerpts of upcoming fiction, our page provides a short history of the magazine and a list of *EQMM*'s many awards. We share the site with *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and *Mystery Scene Magazine,* and links have already been established with several other mystery pages. Its *the* web site for mystery fans: Don't miss it! Visit us at http://www.mysterypages.com.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEXT ISSUE...

Nocturne
BY JEFFERY DEAVER

A Dead Language
BY GILLIAN LINSCOTT

Bubbles and la Bitsch
BY TIM HEALD

Best Behaviour
BY SIMON BRETT

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE. Vol. 113, No. 1. Whole No. 688, January, 1999. Published monthly except for a combined September/October double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. 1 year subscription $33.97 in U.S.A. and possessions, $41.97 elsewhere, payable in advance and in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Call 800-333-3053 with questions about your subscription. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to Ellery Queen, P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80322-4625. Editorial and Executive Offices, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016. Periodical postage paid at New York, N.Y. and at additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260649. © 1997 Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright convention. ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE® is the registered trademark of Ellery Queen. Submissions must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80328-4625. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1E9. USPS 523-610, ISSN 1054-8122. Dell GST: R123054108. For back issues, send your check for $5.00 (U.S. funds) to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Suite SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. Please specify the issue you are ordering. Add $2 per copy for delivery outside the U.S.

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

PRINTED WITH SOY INK

JANET HUTCHINGS
Editor

BRENT BAGWELL
Editorial Assistant

SUSAN KENDRIOSKI
Executive Director,
Art & Production

VICTORIA GREEN
Senior Art Director

SHIRLEY CHAN LEVI
Assistant Art Director

CAROLE DIXON
Production Manager

ABIGAIL BROWNING
Manager,
Subsidiary Rights & Marketing

BRUCE W. SHERBOW
Director of Newsstand Sales

SANDY MARLOWE
Circulation Services

PETER KANTER
Publisher

ELLERY QUEEN
Editor-in-Chief 1941-1982

ELEANOR SULLIVAN
Editor-in-Chief 1982-1991

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE
DAVID GELLER PUBLISHER'S REP
(212) 682-1540

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

Ellery Queen January '99

Advertise to the World's largest mystery magazine audience with our Ellery Queen/Alfred Hitchcock combined classified section. Ad Rates per issue: $4.95 per word (10 word minimum), $350 per column inch (2.25 inch maximum). SPECIAL INTRODUCTORY OFFER: Buy two issues and receive a third issue FREE. Send orders to: Dell Magazines, Classified Department, P.O. Box 1510, Clearwater, FL 33757-1510. Direct inquires to: (800) 237-9851; Fax (727) 445-9380.

ADDITIONAL INCOME

MAKE $1277 WEEKLY STAPLING REPORTS. Start now. One time supply fee. $29.95 money order. J.C. Marketing 2530 49th Ave. North, St. Petersburg, FL 33714.

AUTHORS

AGENT SEEKING AUTHORS SASE: Deb GEM, 4717 Poe Road, Medina, OH 44256. www.gembooks.com

ASTROLOGY

EMPOWER YOURSELF through Earth's religion. Free Protective Pentacle. The School of Wicca-AN, Hinton, WV 25951-0297.

BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

FREE CATALOG Collectible and used mystery books. Dunn and Powell Books, Dept. DP, The Hideaway, Bar Harbor, ME 04609-1714, dpbooks@acadia.net/www.dpbooks.com

FREE CATALOGS Collectible/used mysteries. Murder is Served, 5273 Bittersweet Drive, Dayton, OH 45429. (937) 438-0211.

FREE LISTS. Quality used paperbacks: mysteries, SF, gothics, westerns. (Please specify.) Steve Lewis, 62 Chestnut, Newington, CT 06111.

JOSEPH HANSEN. LIMITED EDITION. Ghosts & Other Poems, signed, with fine author photo. $12 postpaid. Smallrains Press, P.O. Box 5040, Laguna Beach, CA 92652.

BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

MYSTERY ADDICTS! Free Catalog! New and recycled detective fiction. Grave Matters, Box 32192-C, Cincinnati, OH 45232, (513) 242-7527.

SEND FOR FREE catalog of mystery and detective fiction. Canford Books, Drawer 216E, Freeville, NY 13068

MISCELLANEOUS

www.jamesbond.org Online mystery magazine visits & submissions welcome.

MURDER MYSTERY CRUISE

11TH ANNUAL MURDER MYSTERY CRUISE, March 13, 1999. Seven day cruise to the Southern Caribbean aboard Princess Cruises' magnificent Dawn Princess. Guest, Ed Hoch. Call CruiseWorks (800) 876-6664.

PATENTING

INVENTORS: Apply for a Patent! FREE Information Kit. Call (800) 846-8368, Ext. 404.

PUBLISHING

NEW AUTHORS
PUBLISH YOUR WORK
ALL SUBJECTS CONSIDERED
Fiction, Biography, Religious, Poetry, Children's
AUTHORS WORLDWIDE INVITED.
WRITE OR SEND YOUR MANUSCRIPT TO
MINERVA PRESS
2 OLD BROMPTON ROAD, LONDON SW7 3DQ, ENGLAND

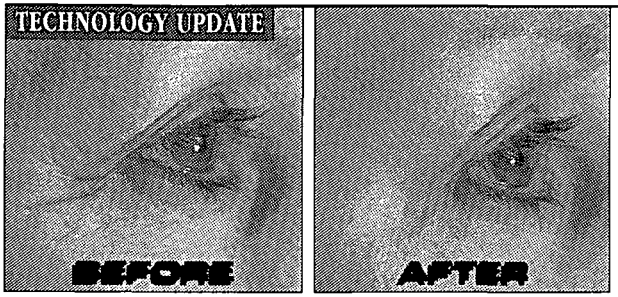
FREE AD OFFER IN OUR MYSTERY COMBO

Take advantage of placing an ad in our next two issues and receive a third ad FREE!

Your ad will reach a combined audience of 300,000 readers in our outstanding publications – ELLERY QUEEN and ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S Mystery Magazines. Call today for a new rate card.

Dell Magazine • Classified Department • P.O. Box 1510 • Clearwater, FL 33757-1510
Call: (800) 237-9851 • FAX: (727) 445-9380

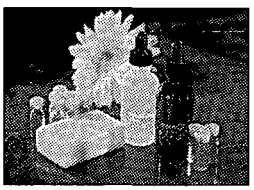
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



European skin-care secret takes off ten years in just ten minutes

TheraCél's™ four-step program locks in moisture to freshen and tighten skin right before your eyes.

by Erica Williams



As you age, moisture becomes locked into the skin, causing individual cells to shrink. The Advanced Procellular Formula hydrates the skin, actually pumping it up. Fine lines and wrinkles virtually disappear.

While no skin-care product can stop the aging process, scientific research into skin care has made some incredible advances. Now there is an extraordinary new four-step program that provides instant results right before your eyes. TheraCél is like getting a face lift...without surgery.

All-natural. Created in Paris by a Swiss scientist, the amazing TheraCél program is easy-to-use and contains natural ingredients. The protein-based system uses mild fatty and amino acids along with polypeptides that are found in skin cells. It is not a moisturizer—it is a procellular formula. This means that it actually pumps up the skin cells, causing fine lines and wrinkles to virtually disappear. It isn't makeup, so it isn't simply covering up the lines. TheraCél in fact produces dramatic results.

Younger skin. The secret behind the TheraCél skin-care system is its exclusive four-step process. First, you use the Cleansing Bar to work off makeup, impurities and dead skin. Unlike oily cleansers, TheraCél uses Emü oil and fatty acids to clean thoroughly without drying out the skin. After you finish, run your finger along your face, and if it squeaks, it's clean. Next, you apply the advanced Procellular Formula, which works deep within the skin to inflate and rejuvenate the skin. Third, the Day Serum is the procellular moisturizer. It restores vital nutrients and dries quickly, and it comes with a special applicator for easy use at home or at the office. The beauty of this moisturizer is that you can even apply it over makeup! It is recommended that you use a pressed or loose powder makeup rather than one with an oily base. Finally, you apply the Night Serum before you go to bed. It will cause blushing for 10 to 15 minutes, as it cleanses deeply and tightens the skin. You will actually be able to feel it working.

Risk-free. We're sure that TheraCél will work for you and improve your appearance. It comes with Comtrad's exclusive risk-free home trial. Try it for yourself, and if you are not satisfied for any reason, return the unused portion within 30 days for a full, "No Questions Asked" refund.

TheraCél™:

Three credit-card payments of $49.95 $10 S&H

System includes Cleansing Bar, Moisturizer, Procellular Serum and Night Serum.

Please mention promotional code **3663-14296**

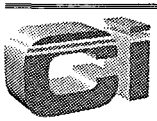
For fastest service, call toll-free 24 hours a day

800-992-2966

DISCOVER NOVUS VISA MasterCard American Express Cards

To order by mail, send check or money order for the total amount including S&H. To charge it to your credit card, enclose your account number and expiration date.

Virginia residents only—please include 4.5% sales tax.



comtrad industries

2820 Waterford Lake Dr., Suite 102
Midlothian, Virginia 23113

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Yours FREE!

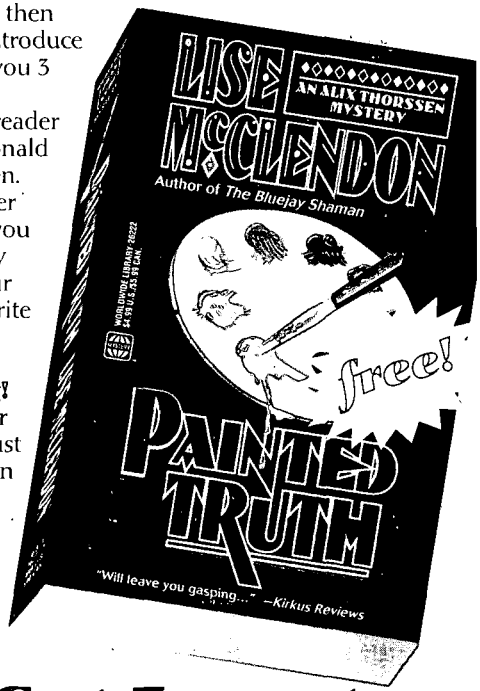
LISE McCLENDON'S *Painted Truth*

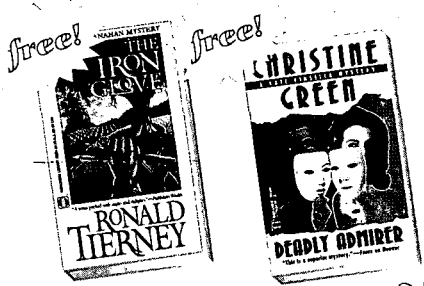
If you enjoy fast-paced mystery thrillers, then you'll love **The Mystery Library™!** To introduce you to this superb series, we'd like to send you 3 FREE BOOKS!

Your free books include *Painted Truth* by reader favorite Lise McClendon, *The Iron Glove* by Ronald Tierney and *Deadly Admirer* by Christine Green.

These three books have a combined cover price of $14.97, but they are yours free! (All you pay is a 99¢ delivery charge. Send no money now; we'll bill you later.) After receiving your books, if you don't wish to get any more, write "cancel" on the statement and return it with your 99¢ payment. **You'll be under no further obligation to buy anything!**

If you do not cancel, about a month later we'll send you 3 more books and bill you just $4.19 each plus 25¢ delivery*. You may return any shipment at our expense and cancel at any time, even after your first shipment. There is no minimum number of books to buy, no hidden extras! So go ahead—accept our special offer and find out how exciting The Mystery Library™ is!

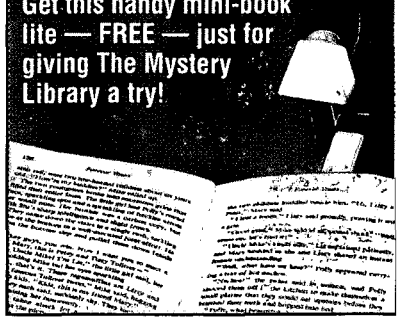




Get 3 mystery novels FREE!

SPECIAL FREE GIFT!

Get this handy mini-book lite — FREE — just for giving The Mystery Library a try!



COLOR MAY VARY

THE MYSTERY LIBRARY™

YES! Please send me the three books under the terms described above, and bill me just 99¢ for delivery. And please send my free Book Lite. I understand that I am under no obligation to purchase anything else and I may cancel at any time.

415 WBE CPQP

NAME _____
(Please print)

ADDRESS _____ APT# _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

Mail to: THE MYSTERY LIBRARY
P.O. BOX 9017 • BUFFALO, NY 14240-9017

*Terms and prices subject to change without notice. Sales tax applicable in N.Y. All orders subject to approval. Offer limited to one per household. Offer only available in the U.S. "THE MYSTERY LIBRARY" and Globe Design are trademarks of Harlequin Enterprises Limited.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED